

THE
WORKS
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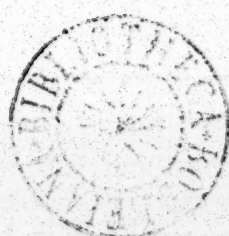
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C O N T E N T S.

S E R M O N XLIII.

The Importance of a careful Examination of our Principles of Religion.

I THESS. v. 21, 22.

Prove all things: hold fast that which is good: abstain from all appearance of evil. - - - page 1

S E R M O N XLIV.

Firmness in the Practice of Religion and Virtue.

The same text. - - - 13

S E R M O N XLV.

Of Inoffensiveness and Innocence of Life and Manners.

The same text. - - - 25

S E R M O N XLVI.

The Meanness and Falseness of the Common Excuse for Irreligion and Immorality.

LUKE xii. 57.

Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right? 35

S E R M O N XLVII.

The Folly and Misery of Sensual Indulgences.

2 Tim. iii. 4.

— *Lovers of pleasures, more than lovers of God.* 48

S E R M O N XLVIII.

Jesus Christ the Author and Finisher of our Faith, and a perfect Pattern for our Imitation.

Heb. xii. 2.

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith: who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God, - - - 61

CONTENTS.

SERMON XLIX.

The Genuine Doctrine of the Gospel, and the Causes of the
Opposition of Jews and Gentiles to it.

1 Cor. i. 22, 23, 24.

*For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom;
But we preach Christ crucified; unto the Jews a stumbling
block, and unto the Greeks foolishness;
But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ
the power of God, and the wisdom of God.*

p. 72

SERMON L.

Faith in a Future State, the Chief Consolation under Af-
fliction.

1 Cor. xv. 19.

*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men
most miserable.*

84

SERMON LI.

Of the Sin against the Holy Ghost, and the Danger of rashly
applying it to ourselves or others.

MATTH. xii. 31, 32.

*Wherefore I say unto you; All manner of sin and blasphemy
shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Ho-
ly Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.*

*And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall
be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy
Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nei-
ther in the world to come.*

94

SERMON LII.

The Happiness of enjoying Satisfying Evidence of the Truth
of Christianity.

MATTH. xiii. 16.

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they
hear.*

108

CONTENTS.

SERMON LIII.

The Qualities of a Pious and Devout Hearer of the Word of God.

LUKE viii. 18.

Take heed therefore how ye hear. - - - p. 130

SERMON LIV.

The Evil and Danger of Fickleness in Religion.

JOSH. xxiv. 15.

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served, that were on the other side of the flood; or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. - 143

SERMON LV.

Of Love to God as the First and Great Commandment.

MATTH. xxii. 37, 38.

Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. - 155

SERMON LVI.

Of the Love of our Neighbour.

MATTH. xxii. 39.

And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. - - - 170

SERMON LVII.

Our Saviour's Temptation in the Wilderness.

MATTH. iv. 1.

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil. - - - 184

SERMON LVIII.

The Misery and Unhappiness of a Sensual and Worldly Spirit.

PHIL. ii. 21.

For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's. - - - 195

CONTENTS.

SERMON LIX.

The Joy and Exultation of St Paul in Publishing the Doctrines and Precepts of Christianity.

GAL. vi. 14.

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom the world is crucified unto me; and I unto the world. - p. 207

SERMON LX.

On the Resurrection of Christ, and the Effects of this Event on the Lives and Manners of true Christians.

COL. iii. 1, 2.

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.—Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. 219

SERMON LXI.

The Nature of Religious Dispensation in the Old and New Testament.

1 JOHN ii. 7, 8.

Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment, which ye had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word, which ye have heard from the beginning.

Again, a new commandment I write unto you: which thing is true in him and in you; because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth. - - - 231

SERMON LXII.

The Tendency of the Spirit of the Gospel, and its Miserable Perversion by Human Depravity.

MATTH. x. 34.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword. 242

SERMON LXIII.

The Danger and Misery of Loose Morals, and of Licentious Associates.

EPH. v. 11.

*And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness :
but rather reprove them.* - p. 255

SERMON LXIV.

The same, - - - - - 267

SERMON LXV.

The Importance of Self-Examination, and Consequent Reformation.

LAM. iii. 40.

Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. 279

SERMON LXVI.

True Religion the Evidence of a good Understanding.

PROV. ix. 10.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom : and the knowledge of the Holy is understanding. - - - 289

SERMON LXVII.

The Meaning of the Expression, of Taking up the Cross.

MARK. viii. 34.

And when he had called the people unto him, with his disciples also ; he said unto them, whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 301

SERMON LXVIII.

Our Saviour's Sovereignty over the Dead and Living,

ROM. xiv. 9.

For to this end Christ both died and rose and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. - 313

SERMON LXIX.

The Evidence of the Resurrection of Christ.

ACTS x. 40, 41.

Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly. Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead. - - - - - P. 324

SERMON LXX.

Ministers of the Gospel, the Ambassadors of Christ.

2 COR. v. 20.

Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. - - - - - 336

SERMON LXXI.

The Present Disadvantages, Shamefulness, and Punishment of a Wicked Life.

ROM. vi. 21.

What fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. - 347

SERMON LXXII.

The same - - - - - 357

SERMON LXXIII.

Ardent Desires of Obtaining Piety and Virtue, ever Favoured by the Almighty.

MATTH. v. 6.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. - - - - - 368

SERMON LXXIV.

The Essence of True Religion.

JAMES i. 27.

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. - 378

CONTENTS.

ix

SERMON LXXV.

The Folly and Danger of Resting in the Mere Form of Godliness.

2 TIM. iii. 5.

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. - - - P. 390

SERMON LXXVI.

The Period of Christ's Appearance in the World, the Most Proper in the wisdom of God.

GAL. iv. 4.

When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, - - - 400

SERMON LXXVII.

The Danger of Unbelief, and the Advantages of Rational Faith.

JOHN xx. 29.

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they, that have not seen, and yet have believed. - - - 412

SERMON LXXVIII.

On Christian Faith, and the Public Avowal of it.

ROM. x. 10.

For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. - 425

SERMON LXXIX.

Prying into the Secret Things of God reprov'd.

LUKE xiii. 23. 24.

Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. - - - 436

CONTENTS.

SERMON LXXX.

The Mortification of Irregular Desires and Appetites, an evidence of a true Christian.

GAL. v. 24.

And they, that are Christ's, have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts. - - - P. 447

SERMON LXXXI.

On confirmed Faith in the Power and Justice of God.

HEB. xi. 17.

By faith, Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac : and he, that had received the promises, offered up his only begotten Son. - - - 459

SERMON LXXXII.

The Presumption of Prying into Religious Mysteries.

DEUT. xxix. 29.

The secret things belong unto the Lord our God : but those things, which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever ; that we may do all the words of this law. 476

SERMON LXXXIII.

Our Saviour's Command to Preach the Gospel to the World, and the Rational Manner of its Propagation.

MATTH. xxviii. 19, 20.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you : and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. - - - 489

SERMON LXXXIV.

The same, - - - 499

SERMON LXXXV.

On the Cruelty of Tyrants, and their Striking Counter-action by Providence.

MATTH. ii. 16.

Then Herod, when he saw, that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth ; and sent forth, and slew all the children

CONTENTS.

xi

that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under; according to the time, which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. - p. 510

SERMON LXXXVI.

The Happiness of a Godly Life.

PSALM. cxxviii, 5, 6.

The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion, and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life.

Yea, thou shalt see thy childrens children, and peace upon Israel. - - - 522

SERMON LXXXVII.

The Rational Idea of a Christian Fast.

MATTH. vi. 16.

Moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites. 529

SERMON LXXXVIII.

On good Character, or General esteem of Mankind.

PROV. xxii. i.

A good name is rather to be chosen, than great riches. 537

SERMON LXXXIX.

The Liberality of the Gospel Scheme, in the Contempt of Partial distinctions.

GAL. v. 16.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. - 549

SERMON XC.

The same - - - 563

SERMON XCI.

The Death of Stephen, a Pattern of Faith and Forgiveness.

ACTS vii. 59, 60.

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit.— And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge, And when he had said this, he fell asleep. - - 577

CONTENTS.

SERMON XCII.

Reliance on the Spirit of God, united with a proper respect to our own Understanding, in our Addresses to the Almighty.

I COR. xiv. 15.

—I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also : I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. - - - p. 591

SERMON XCIII.

The same - - - 603

SERMON XCIV.

The same, - - - 616

SER.

SERMON XLIII.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CAREFUL EXAMINATION OF OUR PRINCIPLES OF RELIGION.

I THESS. V. 21, 22.

Prove all things : hold fast that which is good : abstain from all appearance of evil.

BY the extensive word, *all*, the apostle in this place evidently means no more, than *all things* which may be right or wrong in point of conscience. And by *proving them* he means, not that we should try them both by experience, which would be an absurd and pernicious direction : but that we should examine them by our faculty of judgment, which is a wise and useful exhortation. Accordingly, Christianity recommends itself to us at first sight by this peculiar presumption of its being the true religion, that it makes application to men as reasonable creatures, and claims our assent on account of the proofs which it offers. By these alone it prevailed originally : on these it still relies ; and requires faith for the principle of our obedience, only because it produces evidence for the ground of our faith. Now such an institution surely is intitled to receive the fair treatment which it gives, when it asks of mankind no more than this ; that they should first consider well the several obligations they are under ; then adhere to whatever they find to be enjoined them ; and lastly avoid whatever they conceive to be forbidden : which momentous duties I shall endeavour to explain and enforce in three discourses on the text.

That beings, capable of thought, are obliged to think, is very obvious : that they should think with the greatest care on subjects of the greatest importance, is equally so : and the question, what obligations we are under, is plainly of the utmost importance. For our behaviour, and consequently our happiness,

ness, depends on the determination of it. Therefore we are just as much bound to conduct our understanding well, as our tempers or outward actions. And the opportunities given us of showing, either diligence in procuring information, and fairness in judging upon it, or the contrary, are trials, which God hath appointed, of every one's moral character; and perhaps the chief trials, which some have to go through. Every instance, greater or less, of wilfully disregarding truth, instead of seeking and embracing it, argues a proportionable depravity of heart; whether the dislike be manifested in a studious opposition to it, or an indolent scorn of it.

There are some who openly profess an utter contempt of all inquiry! despise such as are solicitous either about belief or practice, and even affect a thoughtlessness, which they find to be grown fashionable. Now really, if this be an accomplishment, it is one, that whoever will may easily be master of. But surely men ought to think seriously once for all, before they resolve for the rest of their days to think no more. There are strong appearances, that many things of great consequence are incumbent on us. No one can be sure, that these appearances are fallacious, till he hath examined into them. Many, who have, are fully persuaded of their truth. And, if there be such things in the world as folly and guilt, it can never be either wise or innocent to disdain giving ourselves any trouble about the matter, and take it absolutely for granted, that we may live as we will: a decision of such a nature, that were it made on seemingly ever so good grounds, it would be very fit to review them well from time to time, for fear of a mistake that must be fatal.

And if a general neglect of considering our conduct be criminal, a neglect of considering any part of it must, in its degree, be criminal also. Many have weighed carefully, and observe conscientiously, some duties of life; but will not reflect a moment, whether it be allowable for them to behave, in other points, as they do. And yet, if any moral obligation deserves regard, every such obligation deserves it equally. And when the question comes to be, what is indeed such, and what not, impartial reason, well directed, must be judge; not inclination or fancy: for if these can make things lawful, nothing will be unlawful. And therefore, instead of ever following such guides implicitly, we should always have the greater suspicion that

we

we are going wrong, the more vehemently they press us to go forward.

Some again have searched, and obtained satisfaction, they say, concerning every article of morals; but will not concern themselves about religion. Yet surely the inquiry, whether there be a wise and just ruler of this universe or not; and if there be, what homage he expects from us; and what we have to hope or fear from him, according as we pay it, or refuse it; is as material a one, as ever was made. And on what pretence any one can doubt whether it be worth making, and reverently too, it is impossible to say.

Another sort declare, that they have a settled conviction of natural religion, (would God they would ask their hearts, what feelings of it they cultivate, what marks of it they show,) but treat revelation at the same time, as totally unworthy of being considered. Yet that our heavenly Father can give us very useful information both of what we did not know before, and of what we could not know else, is at least as credible, as it is certain that we can give such one to another. And that he may with justice give some men greater advantages than others by supernatural discoveries, is no less clear than that he may give them such advantages by their natural abilities and circumstances. If then God may do this for us, it is a most interesting question, whether he hath or not; and an indispensable precept, which the words, immediately preceding the text, express when joined with it. *Despise not prophecies: prove all things.*

But there is yet a different set of persons, who confess, that both our attention, and our assent, are due to Christianity in general, but who are against discussing any of its doctrines in particular. Provided men know but enough of it, to keep them well-behaved and quiet, nothing further, they conceive, is needful: whatever sentiments about speculative points happen to prevail, should be supported, and no disputes allowed to break in upon the peace of the world. Now it is very true, that society should not be disturbed by contentions about opinions, as it hath often been most dreadfully: nor men be perplexed about questions of mere curiosity, instead of learning better things; nor frightened, or estranged from each other by laying stress on points of mere nicety. And the New Testament strongly forbids all these things. But still, if the Christian religion be from heaven, it cannot be a matter of indifference,

what its real doctrines are : nor can its author have given us the liberty of professing others in their stead. Some of them may seem, and perhaps may be, though that doth not follow, of small consequence to the purposes of common life : but if they convey to us just notions of God, and of those relations of ours to him, which are never the less real for not being discoverable by reason ; if they instruct us in the duties, which those relations require, and form us to that state of mind, which he knows to be requisite for enjoying the happiness of another world, be their connexion with this world ever so little, surely they are important enough. Some of them also have doubts and difficulties attending them ; as even the doctrines of natural religion, and the duties of morality have : but these were intended to furnish us with opportunities of shewing uprightness in judging where we are qualified to judge ; and humility in submitting our shallow imaginations to unfathomable wisdom, where we are not ; the exercise of which virtues here will fit us for a plentiful reward hereafter. And would men but once prevail on themselves to express their thoughts on controverted subjects with decency and candour : society, instead of suffering by debates, would receive much benefit. Christianity would be better understood ; and therefore more justly esteemed, and more discreetly practised : it would be built on firmer foundations, and therefore be securer against all assaults.

There still remains a larger number of Christians, I mean the advocates of the church of *Rome*, who are indeed by no means indifferent what doctrines are held, but vehemently oppose entering into any disquisitions about them ; and would have us, instead of that, first look out for an infallible guide, and then follow him blindfold. But they have never been able to show, that such infallibility exists amongst men ; or even to agree with each other determinately, in whom they should place it. And the scripture, far from directing us to examine this one claim, and after that never to examine more, directs us in many places, but particularly in the text, by as plain words as can be written, to *prove*, that is, examine, *all things*. But were this otherwise, their pretension will require no long examination : for it is in vain to argue that such or such men cannot mistake, when it notoriously appears in fact, that they have mistaken.

Every

Every article, therefore, both of morals and religion, may and ought to be tried, in such manner as can be reasonably expected from the parts, attainments and circumstances of each person: and concerning this, we should both judge modestly for ourselves, and consult others with deference. For attempting too much will be more likely to mislead, than improve us.

But then the more general and important this duty of inquiry is, the more care must be taken to perform it aright. For many pique themselves on a most unbounded zeal for freedom of thought, and a thorough search into things, who yet by no means deserve the character which they assume.

Some of them fancy they have thought very freely upon religion. Now this is, in one sense, treating it freely indeed, but no proof of thinking upon it at all. For mere disbelieving is no more an evidence of having examined, than mere believing is. However, at least, they say, they have thrown off the prejudices, in which they were bred up: and throwing off prejudices must be right. But then they are many of them for extirpating, under that odious name, original natural dispositions in the heart of man. For instance: the propensity, that we all experience to revere an invisible power; the esteem that we all feel of justice and truth, of mercy and goodness, of honour and decency; are as real constituents of our inward frame, as any passion or appetite, that belongs to it. Yet these principles, which direct us to every thing that is good, they would persuade us to root out as prejudices; while they plead earnestly for the inclinations, that continually prompt us to vice, as dictates of nature. And a part of our nature undoubtedly they are: but a part lamentably disordered; and which, in its best estate, the other and higher was evidently designed to govern and restrain. At least, to set out with taking the contrary for granted; and condemn things at once, as groundless prepossessions, which have so respectable an appearance of being the primitive guides of life, is by no means inquiring freely.

Another false notion concerning prejudices, though at first sight a plausible one, is, that we ought to divest ourselves of all desire to find religion true, before we go about to judge of it. Now it is impossible, that a person of a worthy mind should do so. He may indeed, and will take care, not to be misled by his desire. But he neither can, nor ought to be indifferent concerning a point, on which his own eternal happiness,

ness, and that of every good man upon earth, depends. Nor is this the only case, far from it, in which we are bound to wish on one side, and yet determine fairly between both. In judicial proceedings, a benevolent magistrate will constantly wish, that whoever is accused before him may prove innocent: notwithstanding which, he will try his cause with the most upright impartiality.

But if this degree of prepossession in favour of religion be right, how exceedingly wrong must prepossession against it be! What are we to think of those, and what have they cause to think of themselves, who can take pleasure in that comfortless and horrid view of things, which infidelity gives; and triumph in believing, that *there is no reward for the righteous, no God that judgeth the earth**! One would hope they do not see distinctly, and yet it is exceedingly visible, what malevolence to human kind rejoicing in a thought of this nature implies.

Or if they do not wish against religion in general, yet, if they wish against the Christian religion, they are enemies to a doctrine, which confirms very powerfully all the great truths that reason teaches; which clears up, intirely to our advantage, many tormenting doubts, that reason leaves us involved in; and which, however it may have been perverted, (as every good thing in the world hath) undeniably is in its nature an institution the most completely fitted to make men happy in themselves and one another, in the present state and the future, that ever was. Did we then see those, who profess themselves unsatisfied about its evidence, afraid it was insufficient; grieved that the proofs appeared no stronger, and the objections so considerable; this would shew a mind, which the scripture calls *noble†, not far from the kingdom of God‡*. And at times, the most of them affect to seem thus disposed; and will assure such as press them upon the subject, that, of all things, they wish they could but be so happy as to believe. But why then were they in such haste to disbelieve, and most of them to act viciously upon their disbelief? Why would they not hear and consider first? Why will they not now reconsider the subject, and acquaint themselves with the defences of our faith, as well as the attacks made upon it? Why do they delight in making converts of all that they can? Why are they so prone to ridi-
cule,

* Psalm lviii. 10.

† Acts xvii. 2.

‡ Mark xii. 34.

cule, or calumniate those, whom they cannot? Such symptoms look very suspicious; and should induce those, who are conscious of them, to put the question home to themselves, whether this great good will to religion be really the temper, with which they have ever inquired into it, or do now inwardly think of it; or whether indeed their professions are only a specious manner of talking, occasionally taken up to serve a turn. If the latter be the case, they must, in order to be fair doubters, guard against another sort of prejudices, than they imagined.

Some prejudices, either right or wrong, will take hold of us very soon. And therefore it is fit, that, as far as we can, we should examine the foundation of our early opinions; but with equity, with candour, not with a resolution beforehand to find fault: for as they are never the truer for our being educated in them, they are never the falser either. But indeed the education of many hath placed them so very little in the way, either of receiving prejudices, or hearing arguments in favour of religion; that they have need to begin with throwing off prejudices to its disadvantage; and should suspect that much more may be said for it, than the little, which hath come to their knowledge. It is probable, that they might have some impressions of piety, such as they were, made upon them by the superintendents of their childhood; and it is possible that something may have been added since to these impressions, by their attendance, if haply they have been suffered to attend on publick instruction. But as soon as they begin to see a little more of the world, and observe what passes around them, what a number of things will they meet with, likely to give them a much stronger bias towards infidelity, than the forms of a common education have given them towards faith! They will find but too many declared unbelievers, and even teachers of unbelief: very many, who, if they do not expressly deny christianity, speak and act as if they despised it; and few, in comparison, that vouchsafe it a serious and uniform regard. The abuses of religion they will hear most invidiously magnified; the benefits of it most artfully and maliciously depreciated; the public worship of God condemned, as idle formality; the private, as enthusiastic folly; the ministers of his word represented as objects only of contempt or abhorrence: And the consequence hath been, that, by thinking of us in a manner,
which,

which, with all our faults, God forbid we should deserve, multitudes are come to think of the gospel, that we preach, in a manner, which they certainly ought not, did we deserve ever so ill. When prejudices from without, like these, are added to the vehement ones within, which vanity forms against every thing that would humble it, and passions and appetites against every thing that would restrain them; it is easy to perceive, where the danger of partiality lies; and what prepossessions the company they have kept, the books they have read, the lives they have led, make necessary to be banished by too many, if they would become fair enquirers.

Let it therefore be examined, on what foundation the notions, that we have learned, of religion and virtue stand. But let it be examined also, on what foundation the prevailing notions, which contradict religion and virtue stand. For to lay it down as a maxim, that these are well grounded, and discard the former merely on that presumption, is monstrously unreasonable. We own it to be highly proper, that men should ask themselves, why they believe: but it is equally proper for them to ask, why they disbelieve. Undoubtedly they should not be bigots and zealots: but then they should not be so against religion, any more than for it. Implicit faith is wrong: but implicit infidelity is yet more so. And whatever fault may be found with the trust, which it is said the godly repose in their spiritual guides; it is full as possible, and perhaps in proportion full as frequent, for the ungodly to follow one another on to their lives end, with their eyes close shut, each in the most servile reliance on what his leader tells him; only with the ridiculous addition of admiring most immoderately, all the way, their own wonderful freedom of thought.

By such considerations as these, men should prepare their minds for beginning to inquire. And when they do begin, it is an important rule, not to be too hasty in drawing conclusions, especially bold ones. Viewing things on every side, observing how far consequences reach, and proceeding to collect and hear evidence, till reason saith there needs no more, is grievous labour to indolence and impatience, and by no means answers the ends of conceit and affectation. A shorter way therefore is commonly taken. Some objection of minute philosophy strikes their thoughts unexpectedly, or comes recommended to them as highly fashionable: and whether a solid answer can be
given

given to it, they never ask. Some argument, urged in favour of religion, proves or seems to be a weak one: and, without more ado, they infer, that the rest are no stronger. Some things, which have been generally received, they find or apprehend are false or doubtful: and therefore nothing, they imagine, is certain. Some text of scripture, possibly transcribed or translated amiss, is hard to defend, or to reconcile with some other; and therefore they slight the whole. Some doctrine, which revelation is said to teach, appears hard to understand or admit, or is capable of a ludicrous turn; and therefore immediately they reject, not only that, but others not in the least connected with it; throw aside at once the intire system; and, it may be, plunge headlong into vice. Yet, all the while, revelation perhaps doth not teach this doctrine, and they are offended solely at a phantom of their own dressing up; or perhaps teaches it with great reason, for any thing which they can ever prove to the contrary. For in a nature so unsearchable as that of God, and a scheme so vast as that of his universal government, there must be many things, which creatures of our limited faculties cannot approach towards comprehending; and merely for want of comprehending, may fancy to be full of incredibilities, which, could we but know more, or would we but remember that we know so little, would instantly vanish. In matters, therefore, which we understand so very imperfectly, to set up human imagination against divine authority; to rely on crude notions, that things are impossible, which proper testimony shews to be true in fact; or that God cannot be, or do, what, by his own declarations, he is, and hath done, betrays a disposition widely distant from the modesty which becomes us.

Besides, were the difficulties which attend the system of religion, more considerable than they are; yet we should take notice, that difficulties attend the contrary system also; and consider, since one must be true, which is most likely to be so. If there be objections against a creation and a providence; are there not greater against supposing, that the world could have existed without being created, or continue all this time without a providence? If there be somewhat scarce conceivable in the doctrine of a future life and judgement: yet upon the whole, which of the two is most probable, that a wise and good God will finally recompense men according to their works, or

that he will not? If there be things in the gospel-revelation, for which it is hard to account, it is so hard to account for any thing upon earth, as how it should come to have such astonishing proofs, internal and external, of being true, if it be really false? They who think the creed of a Christian so strange and mysterious, let them think a while, what the creed of an infidel must be, if he would only lay aside his general pretences of imposture and enthusiasm, and credulity and bigotry, which thrown out at random will discredit all evidence of history alike; and answer in particular, how, on his own hypothesis, he accounts for all the several notorious facts, on which our religion is built. I am persuaded, there hath never appeared yet amongst men so incomprehensible a collection of tenets, as this would produce. Men may indeed be too easy of belief: but it is just as great a weakness to be too full of suspicion. Reverence for antiquity may impose upon us: but fondness for novelty may do the same thing. Undoubtedly we should be on the watch against pious frauds: but against impious ones too. For whatever dishonesty the advocates of religion have been either justly or unjustly charged with, the opposers of it have given full proof, at least of their inclination not to come short of them. Whoever therefore would proceed in the right path, must be attentive to the dangers on each side.

Perhaps this may seem to require more pains than most persons are capable of. But of an upright disposition every one is capable: and with this, common abilities and leisure will suffice to judge concerning the necessary points of faith and practice. Few indeed, or none, can judge of any thing without relying in some measure on the knowledge and veracity of others. And what must we think of human nature, or what will become of human society, if we can take nothing on each other's word? We should hearken to no one indeed who asserts plain absurdities. And we should always judge for ourselves as far as we can. But we should not affect to do it farther. Where we visibly want, either parts or learning, or time for it, as we frequently do in worldly affairs of great moment, no less than in religion, we are both allowed and obliged to depend on others. Only we must observe these two directions: that we first pay a due respect to that legal authority, under which providence hath placed us: and then chuse, according to the best of our understandings, the worthiest and wisest

wisest and most considerate persons to be our conductors. For as we should never hastily run after uncommissioned guides, so above all things we should beware of artful or self-sufficient, of rash and impetuous ones: which last, however it happens, man are peculiarly apt to follow, though almost sure of being led by them, not only wrong, but great lengths in what is wrong: whereas there are no plainer rules of behaviour than these, that in proportion as we are in the dark, we should go on gently; and wherever there may be hazard, keep on the safer side.

He that will conduct himself thus, may soon make large advances in religious knowledge: and wherever he stops, needs not be uneasy. Though the arguments, which he hath for his faith, may not be the strongest: yet a *tree*, but weakly rooted, often *brings forth good fruit*: and if it doth, will never *be hewn down, and cast into the fire*.^{*} Though he may be ignorant of many things, and doubt or even err concerning many others, yet they may be of small importance; or, though of great, yet having used a competent care to inform himself, he will obtain pardon. We cannot indeed say with exactness, how much of their time and pains men are bound to spend upon examination, any more than how much of their wealth in works of charity, and the less, as both duties vary according to the circumstances of every individual. But let each consult his conscience, with a serious desire of being told the truth, whether it hath been, and is now his habitual endeavour to determine and to act as rightly as he can: and, if the answer be clearly in his favour, when he is neither disposed to frighten nor flatter himself, let him trust in God, *and be at peace*.[†] For *like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him*.[‡]

Not that, after all, it is indifferent, whether we fall into errors concerning religion, or escape them. For both mistakes and bare ignorance, where they are accompanied with little or no guilt, may often be followed by great disadvantages. Wrong notions in the understanding may produce wrong movements in the heart: which, even when they will not bring down upon us future punishment, may unfit us for certain degrees of future reward. And, on the contrary, a larger portion of piety and virtue, and therefore of heavenly felicity, may

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prove

^{*} Matth. iii. 10. vii. 19. [†] Job. xxii. 21. [‡] Psal. ciii. 13.

prove to be the natural consequence of a more extensive acquaintance with gospel truths. So that, in the reason of things, as well as the sure foundation of divine promises, good Christians are intitled to expect those distinguished glories in a better world, for which, others, though, in proportion to their talents, truly good, may not be qualified.

But still it is allowable to hope, and to rejoice in hoping, that a being unspeakably gracious will confer some measure of happiness hereafter on all the sons of men, who have not made themselves incapable of it; and that neither involuntary nor excusable misapprehensions will exclude any from it. If indeed, under colour of reasoning freely, men will argue fallaciously, conclude precipitately, and behave presumptuously; talk and do what they please without modesty or fear, and set themselves up, on this merit, for the only assertors of liberty, when in truth they are willing slaves to a wicked mind; these, of all men, *have no cloak for their sin**. But the virtuous and humble inquirer, who studies to conduct his understanding with impartial care first, and his life with inoffensive sincerity afterwards, yet conscious of his many failings, begs for pardon and strength to be given him in such manner as his Maker sees fit, may surely comfort himself with pleasing expectations of acceptance after death. *As many, therefore, as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God*†.

* John xv. 22.

† Gal. vi. 16.

S E R M O N XLIV.

FIRMNESS IN THE PRACTICE OF RELIGION AND VIRTUE.

I THESS. V. 21, 22.

Prove all things : hold fast that which is good ; abstain from all appearance of evil.

THE first duty of reasonable creatures, with respect to religion, is, informing themselves, as fully as their natural abilities, their improvements in knowledge, and their conditions of life permit, concerning its truth, and the doctrines it teaches. Multitudes are unable to proceed far in this inquiry : of the rest, some totally neglect it, some carry it on with less care and integrity, or fewer advantages, than others. And hence it comes to pass, that different persons think upon the subject in very different manners : and even the same person, in progress of time, very differently from himself. But then every state of mind, that men can be in, relative to these matters, hath its proper obligations belonging to it : and, for want of paying due regard to them, they whose opinions are right may be very bad in their practice ; and they whose opinions are wrong, much worse, than even their own notions, by any just consequence, allow them to be. Not uncommonly indeed the goodness of mens nature prevails, through God's mercy, in some points, over the ill tendency of their principles ; and makes them better than they profess themselves. But much oftener they run into such behaviour, as must be unwarrantable, according to the very doctrines which they have embraced. And therefore every one should consider well, to what sort of conduct these really direct him, and from what they restrain him. Men may think, they could not help being of the opinions they are : but if they take still greater liberties, than their opinions lead them to ; instead of suspecting, that possibly
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they may lead them too far: this they must know to be their own fault; and, while they indulge it, one doth not see, what they will stop at: whereas keeping carefully within the bounds, which their judgements sets them, will be the best excuse they can have, in their present way of thinking; and the likeliest means of discerning and amending the errors of it.

Having therefore laid before you, in the first place, the duty of *proving all things*, and the general disposition of mind with which it should be done: I proceed now to the consequent duty of *holding fast that which is good*, and *abstaining from all appearance of evil*. And as the appearances of good and evil must vary, according to the notions which are espoused about them; it will be useful to consider those of unbelievers, as well as believers: for which purpose, there must be some extraordinary suppositions made: but I hope the truly pious will neither think them shocking, nor useless; being introduced only for the sake of suggesting to them such things, as though they want not for themselves, or for others like them, they may perhaps employ to good effect for convincing or silencing infidels and libertines, when occasion requires: and there hath seldom been more occasion, than at present.

To begin then with imagining a worse case, than perhaps is possible. Were any one persuaded, not only that all religion is groundless, but that virtue and vice, right and wrong, are mere words without meaning: yet even such a one, if he did not think wisdom and folly, pleasure and pain, empty sounds too; would have some rule of conduct, so far as it reached. Still it would be a matter of serious consideration, what behaviour promises the most happiness, upon the whole, to such beings, placed in such a world, as we are. And our present interest here, had we no other guide, far from permitting us to do every mad thing, that passion, appetites or fancies, prompt us to, would direct us, in a great measure, to a course of honesty, friendliness and sobriety. For not only life and health, and safety and quiet: of which no other method can possibly give us, in general, near so good a prospect; are of much too high importance, to be hazarded wantonly: but reputation also is a matter of no small value; and peace within of greater still. Now suppose there were no reason in the least for any one to feel satisfaction in doing good natured and just things, or uneasiness from the reflection of having done cruel and base ones; yet,

yet, as in fact, almost, if not absolutely, all persons do feel both to aim at the former, and avoid the latter, is, without regard to principle, a dictate of common prudence.

But farther, whatever some may think of moral obligation themselves, they have many reasons to desire that the world about them should think highly of it. For though discretion, abstracted from sense of duty, might reasonably, in most cases, restrain those, with whom we are concerned from using us ill; yet it will restrain them but in few instances; and then very imperfectly. So that whoever is considerate, will be extremely unwilling to weaken the bonds of human society: which he will find, at best, are by no means too strong. And therefore, should he think it his own interest to be wicked; yet if he be wise he will never attempt to make one single person like him, besides those whom he absolutely needs for associates: and even of such he will beware: for he hath *taught them an evil lesson against himself**. But spreading his opinions farther, he will look on as the silliest of vanities: and be earnestly desirous, that others should act upon principle, whatever he doth himself: that his friends should be faithful and affectionate, his servants honest and careful, his children dutiful and regular. And they, who, in the fancied superiority of their knowledge, teach those about them, or those with whom they converse, to be profligate; by expressing, either designedly or carelessly, a contempt of virtue; well deserve the return, they often meet with, for such instructions.

Nay indeed every prudent man, be his private way of thinking ever so bad, will be solicitous to persevere in the world, not only morals; but, for the sake of morals, what is the main support of them, religion too: and that religion, which is the likeliest to support them. Though he conceive it to be false, he will respect it as beneficial, were he to imagine this or that part of it hurtful; he would still moderate this zeal against them, so as not to destroy the influence of the rest. For if believing some things may do harm in the world, believing others may do good. And if any thing whatever can do much good, and no harm: it is the persuasion, that we live continually under the eye of an infinitely powerful and wise, just and good ruler; who hath sent us a person of inconceivable dignity, on purpose to give us the fullest assurance of his rewarding all,
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* Eccles. ix. 1.

who shall repent and amend, and punishing all who continue in wickedness, both here and to eternity. To do or say what may weaken the impressions of such a doctrine, must, on all suppositions, be the grossest folly. And yet some, who have the highest opinion of their own understandings, are perpetually guilty of it: and seem not to discern, how impossible it is, that the world should never be influenced, to any good purpose, by what the daily conversation and example of those, who are likely to be reckoned the more knowing part of the world, encourage the rest to despise.

But I dwell too long on the supposition that men can be absolutely persuaded, that religion and virtue are nothing. For though many have wished, and some said it, when the wickedness of their lives hath driven them to that refuge: and though others may have been led, by love of singularity, or indignation against reigning superstitions, to advance the same notion: yet neither their numbers, nor their abilities, have been comparatively at all considerable: and besides, few of them appear to have thoroughly convinced themselves, at least for any time, of what they affirmed: nor is their pretence of ground for such conviction to rest on. Doubts indeed may be raised, such as they are. And therefore let us consider, in the second place, the obligations of those, who are doubtful about these matters. Now uncertainty, as it implies an apprehension, that they may not be true; implies also an apprehension, that they may. And the lowest degree of likelihood, the very possibility, that God is, and that virtue is his law, should in all reason have a powerful influence on the minds and conduct of men. Perhaps they fluctuate, only because they have not taken due pains to inform themselves. They are ignorant; not religion and morals destitute of proof; and instead of slighting, they should study them. Or supposing, after some inquiry, that they cannot determine: this happens in many cases, where further inquiry affords full evidence; concerning the main point at least, if not every particular. But were we to remain ever so much at a loss when we have done our best: not knowing things to be true, is an exceedingly different state from knowing them to be false; how apt soever we are to confound the one with the other. In the affairs of this world, men may be quite in suspense about matters, which yet are very important realities: and it may be of the utmost consequence to them, whether, during

during that suspense, they act rightly or not: nay, while it is ever so uncertain, what they are to think; it may be very clear how they are to behave: and, by following or transgressing that rule, they may as truly deserve well or ill, as by any other part of their conduct. Why then may not the case be the same, in respect to those, who have not arrived at certainty concerning religious and moral obligations? why may not such doubts be one part of the trial of their behaviour; as well as other perplexities are of the behaviour of other persons?

Being profane and vicious, because they do not see clearly, is determining, instead of doubting: and determining on the side, that is not only prejudicial to all around them, but dangerous to themselves. For it is exceedingly little, were all things well considered, that we can almost ever get by wickedness: but what we may suffer by it, is infinite. The fruits of it in this life are usually found very bitter: nor is there any shadow of proof, but another may succeed it. And if there should, innocence here cannot possibly hurt us hereafter: but guilt runs a double risque; not only as uneasy reflections naturally follow it, but as farther punishment may be justly inflicted on it. The slightest sense of duty, that we can experience, should have made us at least suspect, that so peculiar a feeling as that, is not to stand for nothing in our composition.

And if men will do, what they are told, by a secret voice within, they ought not; it is fit they should take the consequences, in the next world, as well as the present. For it is knowing they did ill, not knowing they should be condemned for it, that makes their condemnation just. And though acute and subtle reasoners may easily build up a specious system of doubts and questions, yet this is a poor defence to rest the whole of their beings upon: especially as men have so irresistible a conviction, that right and wrong are notions of great consequence, when their own rights are invaded; that they cannot in earnest think them idle words, or matters of indifference, when their neighbours are concerned, let them say what they will.

And therefore we may now go on to a third supposition; that men acknowledge the obligation of morals, but not of religion; and let us consider, what they are to do. They almost universally take the liberty of doing one very bold and wrong thing, of most extensive bad effect. They model their notions

of morals, just according to their own fancy; and reduce them into as narrow a compass, as they think convenient. So that, while they talk very highly of virtue, they practise little or nothing of it: or, if they observe some duties strictly, yet others, though, it may be, scarce of less moment, but less agreeable to them, they neither regard, nor acknowledge, but hold them in utter contempt. Thus one part of the world transgresses the rules of sobriety and chastity; another lives wholly to idle and expensive amusements; a third is wickedly selfish or ill-natured in private affairs; a fourth unreasonably vehement in public ones; and yet all contrive to overlook their own faults in these points, and admire their own goodness in others: whereas to be truly good, we must be so in every thing alike. But inclination easily prevails over principle, where it hath not the sanction of religion to strengthen it. And they, who profess nothing beyond morals, not only are destitute of that higher aid; but, though their lives fully show how much they want it, very commonly affect a scorn of it, no way to be accounted for. Suppose them doubtful even about natural religion; they must own, that, could it be proved, nothing in the world could influence men to virtue, like it. The fear of punishment, the hope of reward, from the King and Lord of all, the consciousness of living continually in his presence, reverence of his perfect holiness, love of his infinite goodness, reliance on his infinite wisdom and power, are evidently the strongest motives to right behaviour in every station, that can be proposed. They must own too, that the most thoughtful and able men in all ages, have held these motives to be well grounded; that the proofs in favour of them have considerable appearances of being conclusive: and, had they none, it would furnish no cause of triumph, but of the deepest concern to every lover of virtue. Such a one therefore, however uncertain, will abhor the thought of treating so beneficial, so respectable a doctrine with contempt and ridicule: a shocking manner, which frivolous and wrong minds are strangely fond of, on many unfit occasions: and indulging it, thoroughly misleads them from good sense and discreet conduct, in every other article of life, as well as this. On the contrary, the slightest apprehension, that there only may be a just Ruler and Judge of the world, will give every well disposed person great seriousness of heart in thinking upon these subjects, and great decency in speaking of
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of them : will incline him to seek for, and pay regard to, any degree of farther evidence concerning them, that it is real, though perhaps it falls very short of what he could wish : and will engage him, in the mean time, to behave with all the caution, that becomes his present situation. For, in a case of such importance, even small suspicions ought to lay us under no small restraints. Therefore he will let nothing ever escape him, which may induce others to throw off what he only doubts of : he will never solicit them to transgress the precepts of religion, while they acknowledge its authority ; (things palpably wicked, and yet commonly done :) he will much more discourage a groundless neglect, than a groundless belief and practice of it : and he will think himself bound to act thus, not in prudence only, as even men of no principle are, but in conscience also.

These then are the duties of such, if any such there be, as admit the reality of virtue, and are doubtful concerning any thing farther. But indeed the generality of men profess to go so much farther, as to believe in natural religion, whatever they may think of christianity. Let us therefore consider, in the fourth place, what their obligations are. And we shall find an addition of very considerable ones incumbent on them, if they deserve the title they assume, that of deists : in which word, according to its original import, regard to the Deity is principally, if not solely, expressed. But notwithstanding this, it hath now for a long time signified much more determinately that men do not believe in Christ, than that they do believe in God. At least, the belief of some, who would take it exceedingly ill to be called by a worse name, amounts to little more, than a general confused persuasion of some sort of first cause ; probably an intelligent, perhaps a beneficent one too : but with scarce any distinct conception of his being the moral Governor of the world ; much less any serious conviction, that he expects from us a temper and conduct of piety and virtue, as the only condition and means of our obtaining happiness and avoiding misery. Now, if their faith comes short of this, they may very nearly as well have none at all : and if it comes up to this, it binds them indispensably to be very different in their practice, from what they too commonly are : to cultivate in their hearts that fear and love, which the greatness and the goodness of God require : to pay him outwardly that homage

and worship, which our compound frame and the interests of society call for : to beg of him both light to discern truth, and strength to practise it : to make diligent and upright inquiry, what rules he hath pointed out for the conduct of man : to observe them all with the strictest care, however contrary to favourite inclinations ; and to endeavour, as far as their influence reaches, that others also may feel and express the same deep sense of what they owe their Maker. These are evident duties of real believers in him : do they perform them ? They talk in the highest terms of the sufficiency of reason, and the clearness with which natural light teaches every thing needful : Doth it *teach them to live soberly, righteously and godly* ? It is but too easy for them to excel, in this respect, the generality of such, as claim the title of Christians. Why will they not take so honourable a method of putting us, and our profession, out of countenance ? They apprehend themselves perhaps to have been far more strict and careful than we, in forming their opinions : Why will they not manifest a proportionable strictness in regulating their practice too ? That would be a powerful evidence, both to the world and their own hearts, that they are sincere in their pretensions ; that they do not reject the doctrines of the gospel, merely to be excused from the duties of it : nor disown every other law of life, but one within them, that they may be tied to nothing, which they do not like. It would be uncharitable indeed to accuse them of this, without proof : but they would do well to examine, whether they are not guilty of it. For it is a dangerous temptation : and one thing looks peculiarly suspicious in many of them ; that they have so little or no zeal for natural religion, and so vehement a zeal against revealed. Surely every one, who inwardly honours God, must be affected quite otherwise : and think both his conscience and his character concerned in showing the warmest attachment to the former, and the mildest equity in relation to the latter. If he not only suspected, but imagined he knew the scripture-scheme to be false, still he must own it to be a falsehood with the most amazing quantity of truth in it, that ever was : to give men, however it happens, beyond comparison, the rightest notions, the justest precepts, the joyfullest encouragement, both in piety and morals, that ever system did : and to have been

*the light of the world**, so far as appears, from the very beginning of it. Our only knowledge of the existence of true religion in the earliest times, is from the discoveries recorded in the bible, as made to the Patriarchs. The Jewish dispensation afterwards was for many ages the main bulwark of faith *in one God, the Maker of heaven and earth*: nor probably was it from any other source, that the learned heathens derived their chief acquaintance with divine truths, after that they had forgotten the primitive tradition of them. Then lastly, the christian revelation overturned, when every thing else had appeared incapable of doing it, polytheism and idolatry, immoral superstition and profligate vice, wherever it was preached: and though it was indeed perverted for a time to patronize, in some degree, what it had destroyed; yet, by the native goodness of its constitution, it recovered again: and is now professed by the church, of which we are members, in greater purity, than elsewhere upon earth, infidels themselves being judges. If therefore they have in truth the affection, which they cannot deny but they ought to have, for genuine, moral, rational piety, they must honour this institution, as an infinitely beneficial one; whether they confess it to be from heaven, or not: and, before they even wish it disregarded, should consider, with no little seriousness, what effects must naturally follow. Would men really believe the being and providence of God, the obligations of virtue, and recompences of another life, the more firmly, for disbelieving the gospel? Would they understand their duty the better, for having no written rule of it? Would they judge about it the more impartially, for being left to make it out by their own fancies? Would they think of it the oftener, for never being instructed in it? Or is there not the strongest appearance, that as from christianity all the true knowledge of religion came, which even the enemies of christianity have to boast of: so with it, all true regard to religion would be lost again? We have been making in the present age some trial of this: and the effects, in private life and public, have been such, that it is very hard to say, why either a good or a wise man should ever want to see, what a farther trial would end in. But, at least, such a one would have much more concern that men should believe and practise what reason and nature teach, than that they should not believe and practise what

what revelation teaches. And even if he could think himself obliged to declare against the latter, be the consequences bad as they will, for the sake of what he imagines truth ; (which yet unbelievers are not apt to consider as a point of such indispensable obligation, in other cases ;) he would however do it in a fair, and honourable, a decent manner : never misrepresent, through design or negligence, the doctrines, the evidence, or the teachers, of the gospel ; never study to expose them to the hatred of men by invectives, or to their contempt by ridicule : but inform himself about them with care, judge of them with candour, and speak of them with good breeding and moderation. Widely different from this, is the conduct of our adversaries ; who take all methods without scruple to engage on their side, the resentments of some, the avarice of others, the vanity of a third sort, the sensuality of a fourth : and notwithstanding, are able, it seems, to pass themselves upon unwary minds for great lovers of free inquiry : but, with a little attention, *by their fruits ye shall know them**. Would God they were cool and serious enough to know themselves ; and to remember, that neither doubt nor disbelief can ever excuse malice or dishonesty. Could they but bring their hearts into such a disposition, their objections would soon diminish, and our answers and arguments appear just and conclusive. To be satisfied of this, let us take a short view of the case of christianity.

God may certainly inform men of most useful things, which they did not, and could not, else know. He may certainly bestow superior advantages on some ages and nations, from motives of which we are ignorant, yet be sufficiently gracious to all. He may see cause to reveal some things to us very imperfectly, and yet require us to believe what he hath revealed, though we are unable to comprehend what he hath not. He may give us commands, without adding the reasons of them, which yet we are bound to obey : for we ourselves do the same thing. He may appoint various forms of religion, suited to various places and times, full as properly as men appoint various forms of government. Farther still, he might as justly permit us to become what we are, frail and mortal, by means of our first parents transgression, as create us what we are, independently upon it. He is no less merciful in pardoning our sins on account of the willing sacrifice, which he hath provided for

us, than if he had pardoned them without any at all. He is no less authorized to demand of us what he will give us power to perform if we ask it aright, than what we had power to perform of ourselves. And he can as easily form our bodies anew, fitted for the purposes of a better life, as he could form them originally, fitted for the purposes of this. If some parts of his word appear hard to be understood, of small use, or even hurtful; many parts of his works appear so too. If the revelation which he hath given us, hath often done harm instead of good: the reason and the affections which he hath given us, have done so likewise. These few considerations, (and there are many obvious ones besides, of the same kind,) would remove out of every honest mind most of the prejudices raised against the faith of christians: which indeed, for the greatest part, bear full as hard against the universal providence of God, even against those proceedings of it, which we daily experience.

Then as to the evidence in favour of our religion: whatever difficulties may be started concerning particular points of it, taken singly; as there may, in the same manner, concerning any evidence in the world; yet lay together, in one view, the scripture-narration of things from the beginning; the consistency and connection of the scheme, though carried on for so many thousands of years; the admirable temper and character of the author of christianity; the sublimity and reasonableness of its doctrines; the purity and benevolence of its precepts; the excellency of its means of improvement and grace; the eternal and true felicity of its rewards; the manifold attestations of its history and miracles; the wonderful propagation of it through the world, and its primitive influence on the souls and lives of men; the undeniable completion of many of its prophecies, and the evident room there is left for the fulfilling of the rest: all these notorious facts, thus united and combined, can surely never fail to convince every impartial examiner, that the system, they support, must be from God, and that the supreme happiness of man is to share in its blessings. Now the weakest degree of such a persuasion, far from being unworthy of regard, because it is no stronger, ought in all justice to produce a most inquisitive attention to farther proof; and, in the mean time, a conscientious practice of what already appears credible. For, though any one's belief exceed his doubts but a little; yet, if it doth so at all, what prevails
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in his mind ought to regulate his conduct : and, acting thus, he will soon experience his faith to increase. Setting himself to keep the commandments, will show him clearly his want of the mercies acknowledged in the creed : and labouring to behave suitably to his present light, will intitle him to that gracious promise of more, given by our blessed Lord : *If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God**.

The further and particular obligations of those, who have acquired this knowledge, and are established in the gospel-faith, must be the subject of another discourse. But the general direction for such as are weak and less advanced, is undoubtedly that of the apostle : *Whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing ; and, if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God will reveal even this unto you†*.

* John vii. 17.

† Phil. iii. 15, 16.

S E R M O N X L V .

OF INOFFENSIVENESS AND INNOCENCE OF LIFE AND MANNERS.

I THESS. V. 21, 22.

Prove all things : hold fast that which is good : abstain from all appearance of evil.

IN discoursing on these words, I have laid before you the duty of carefully considering our obligations, in respect of piety and morals : and acting suitably to our convictions, on those heads. According as our notions of either vary, whether from our different means of knowledge, or different use of them, it must be expected, that our conduct should vary too. And yet I have shown you, that, were it possible for men to disbelieve the authority both of religion and virtue, mere prudence and self-interest would put them under considerable restraints, in relation to each : that whoever only doubts concerning them, admits they may be true ; and therefore should take the acknowledged safer side : that any degree of persuasion, in favour of virtue only, much more of natural religion too, should excite a proportionably serious regard to it : and that the lowest apprehension of the truth of christianity, (which, I hope I proved to you, though briefly, hath the clearest marks of truth upon it) greatly strengthens every other tie ; and farther binds men to inform themselves fully about it, as soon as possible ; and give it respectful treatment in the mean time.

If then even these persons are to behave thus, how are we to behave ? The doubter, nay the infidel, is obliged to no small care of his heart and life : what is the believer obliged to ? We pride ourselves on being such : pity or detest those who are not : and yet, all the while, christians who think and act otherwise than christians ought, may deserve full as ill, perhaps much worse, then they : indeed may be one chief cause,

that they are what they are. Leaving others therefore to the Judge of all; let us at present think of ourselves: consider, what manner of persons our holy profession requires us to be; and whether we so observe its rules, that we may justly hope to attain its end: escape *the wrath to come**, and *partake of the glory that shall be revealed*†. Now it plainly requires,

1. That we be duly affected by the peculiar doctrines of christianity. Many that profess it, and are persuaded of its authority, seem to have no notion almost of its value, or of any great regard owing to it. They say, it is designed intirely to make men live good lives: and accordingly if they do but live what the world calls a good life, the design is answered. As for matters of mere faith, or even of practice beyond this, they conceive there is little need of being concerned about them: and thus they are very good christians in their own opinions, with scarce any thing to distinguish them from good, or perhaps even from indifferent, heathens. In this error, the artful enemies of the gospel studiously confirm its inconsiderate friends. For thus, pretending by no means to oppose it, but only to rectify mens notions about it; and making loud complaints, if they are suspected of any thing worse; they can destroy, where they gain credit, the whole effect of what it adds to the religion of nature: and induce the unwary to imagine, there is nothing in it worth contending for, besides *those practical, social, and real duties*, as they are pleased, by way of distinction, to call them, *which our reason and senses prescribe in common to us all*; and which therefore we learn and observe as well, without as with the bible; where they lie mixed with many other things, useless, if not hurtful; and are either misrepresented by the writers themselves, or very liable to be mistaken by us. But indeed, if the very writers of scripture, with the spirit of God to assist them, misunderstood the doctrines of revelation; he both chose and guided them extremely ill; nor have we any possible means of understanding those doctrines now. And if either they or we understand them at all; our Maker expects from us the belief of many things undiscoverable by reason, as points of great consequence to our eternal well-being; as with good cause he may. The knowledge of our fallen estate shows us our original destination, and our present need of help from above. The incarnation

* Matth iii. 7. Luke iii. 7.

† 1 Pet. v. 1.

tion and death of God's eternal Son could not be appointed by him for purposes of small importance : and his word acquaints us, that blessings of the highest importance depend on what he hath done and suffered for us ; on his atonement and mediation, our title to pardon of sin ; on the grace of the Holy Ghost whom he sent, our ability of performing acceptable obedience ; on both, our resurrection to eternal life ; on our belief of these things, our interest in them. If then the gospel be true, its peculiar doctrines are of the utmost moment : and the duties grounded on them, which we owe to God, as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ; to his Son, as our Redeemer ; to his blessed Spirit, as our sanctifier ; are both as real, and as weighty, as any possible can be ; fully equal in their obligation, and superior in their rank, to the most valuable ones of human society. They therefore who neglect them, lead very wicked, instead of good lives : and they who esteem them lowly, dishonour the author of them. It is true, reason cannot prove them : but it doth not contradict them. They are taught in scripture only : but they are taught there by the all-wise God : and he cannot have left us at liberty to model his revelations according to our own fancies ; admit part, and reject part : but we are to take the whole plan of our salvation, as he hath delivered it : believe it though implicitly ; and respect it, in proportion to the stress laid upon it by him, who must know. This will naturally dispose us,

2. To perform the next obligation incumbent on us : paying a due regard to the peculiar institutions of christianity. Great numbers appear to have somehow persuaded themselves, that several things, which they must acknowledge their Maker hath appointed, as the ordinary means of heavenly grace and spiritual improvement, may notwithstanding, nearly, if not quite, as well, be let alone. Baptism indeed they do practise : but with plain marks of considering it, as a mere empty ceremony ; not, as our Saviour hath declared it*, the express and original condition of our claim to all the mercies of the gospel-covenant. Laying on of hands in confirmation, after proper instruction and a personal engagement to live piously and virtuously, though evidently a very affecting and useful rite, and reckoned, in the epistle to the *Hebrews*, amongst the *principles of the doctrine of Christ*† ; is yet desired, in proportion,

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but

* Mark xvi. 16. John iii. 5.

† Heb. vi. 1, 2.

but by few. Receiving the Holy Eucharist, though a duty of all christians, enjoined by our Blessed Redeemer, almost with his dying words, and declared by St. *Paul* to be *the communion of his body and blood**, that is, a participation of the benefits of his death; is yet, I fear, entirely omitted by most, practised by many of the rest, very seldom; and by some from very improper motives: and such reasons are pleaded for the neglect, as have either no weight at all, or equal weight against the hope of future happiness. Praying to God is a dictate of natural, as well as revealed religion. And yet were a great part of you here present questioned, how constantly you pray in private, indeed when you prayed last, and whether you are careful to do it with attention and seriousness, or look on it only as a matter of course; what answer must you give? And as for publick worship: how many are there, who yet call themselves Christians, that hardly ever attend it? And how do many others think and speak of it? Perhaps as matter of curiosity and amusement. If they can hope for an entertaining discourse after it, they will condescend to come and do homage to him, that made them, or seem to do it: otherwise they will not. Or perhaps they vouchsafe to attend it as matter of decent example and propriety. Accordingly, in some places they always go to church; in others, never: forgetting, that the latter will be known, and will influence, full as much as the former. Or the least trifle in the world shall determine them, sometimes the one way, sometimes the other. And both doing and omitting it they talk of, in an easy, gay manner, as a thing of no consequence at all. Nay, too often, it is directly pleaded, that they can spend their time as well, or much better, another way: for they know beforehand every thing that is told them here. Now, not to enquire particularly, in what better things, that they could not find leisure for else, those persons actually spend the time of divine service, who tell us so frankly they can: possibly they may, some of them, a little over-rate their knowledge: at least, they frequently seem to have great need of being reminded, if not taught: and had they none, another and higher duty, for which we meet, is prayer. But to this, and all other acts of devotion, they object, that true devotion is in the heart; and outward show is nothing material. Why, so is true loyalty, true friendship,

every

* 1 Cor. x. 16.

every true virtue. But are we therefore bound to give no external demonstration of them? At that rate, what would they be worth, and how long would they last? God, indeed doth not want such demonstrations: but we want them, to keep alive our sense of duty to him: the world around us wants them, to spread a like sense amongst others; and, were the benefits of his institutions much less evident than they are; still they are his, and we may be sure he hath reason for them. A good subject will go beyond, rather than come short of, what the laws require, in paying honour to his prince. A penitent criminal will not fail to sue out and plead his pardon in due form, let forms, in themselves, be things ever so insignificant; if he did, purposely or negligently, he would well deserve to forfeit it. Every man of common prudence, on whom or his family, any thing valuable is bestowed on certain conditions, will think it of consequence, to qualify himself, or them, according to those conditions, whether he sees the particular use of them or not. If then we think such behaviour necessary in all temporal concerns, why not in spiritual? God is our king, and hath prescribed to us the manner of doing him homage. He is our judge, and hath directed us to the method of escaping punishment. He is our gracious benefactor, and hath notified to us the means of obtaining his favours. Why shall any one thing, thus ordered by him, and therefore undoubtedly ordered in wisdom, be either omitted, or observed with contempt? Surely this is by no means the spirit, with which sinners ought to receive a tender of forgiveness; and mortals, of eternal life. The epistle to the *Hebrews* directs the first christians, even in the midst of persecution, *not to forsake the assembling of themselves together*, which comprehends every public office of religion; and laments, that *the manner of some was to do otherwise**. How guilty then must they be, who are now of this number; or put on the appearance of despising the ordinances of Christ, at the same time that they use them; and, though really, to some degree, serious in them, are afraid of being thought so! But this leads me,

3. To a farther obligation we are under, which is to profess our regard, both for the doctrines and the institutions of the gospel, openly and boldly, on all fit occasions. It is a reproach, I believe, peculiar to the christians of this age and nation, that

many

* Heb. x. 25.

many of them seem ashamed of their christianity: would not perhaps be said to have thrown it aside, yet would by no means be imagined much in earnest about it: and therefore study, if possible, to conceal their way of thinking: or, when they are attacked upon it, excuse their piety, as others do their vices, with a sort of laughing half deference; and shift off the subject, as well and as soon as they can. A most astonishing treatment of what our eternal happiness depends on: especially when our Saviour expressly requires us to *confess him before men*, as ever we expect, that he should *confess us before his Father, which is in heaven**. It is not meant that we should be affectedly forward in talking of our religion; but whenever we are called to do so, unaffectedly own it, and stand by it. In such a case, dissimulation, or even reserve, is a mean-spirited desertion of the worthiest cause in the world: and the words of the holy Jesus on another occasion are justly applicable to this, that *he, who is not for him, is against him*†. Whoever is unwilling to be taken for a pious and good man, runs a great risque of soon becoming a profane and bad one. Open profession would have restrained him from doing wrong, and others from tempting him: whereas a timorous concealment exposes him both ways. At least, it gives the irreligious a pretence for saying and imagining, either that every one thinks as they do, or that no one can defend thinking otherwise: and deprives those, who are better disposed, of a very animating and needful support. For no inticement to neglect our duty is so dangerous, as the appearance of general neglect: nor any persecution so effectual, as that of public scorn. Therefore we should combine to shelter one another from it: declare frankly and with spirit, in our private conversation, as well as by our attendance here, what side we are of: not be afraid of a little, perhaps only seeming, contempt from those, who are the justest objects of pity themselves; but be willing to *suffer the affliction of shame*, amongst others, if it must be so, *with the people of God*‡: the number of whom is not yet become so small, or so destitute of able advocates, but that, would they unite for that end, they might abundantly keep each other in countenance, and their adversaries in awe. We have every possible reason to be zealous in our cause. Unbelievers have no single good one to be so in theirs. Yet they are active, and we are remiss: and what will

* Matth. x. 32.

† Matth. xii 30. Luke xi. 23.

‡ Heb. xi. 25.

will this end in, unless we change our conduct? But then if we do, there is a

4th, Most important obligation incumbent on us, that of tempering our zeal with mildness and charity. We ought indeed to *contend earnestly for the faith**, whenever it is opposed: but in a manner worthy of it. Cruel actions, opprobrious words, inward ill will, unjust bad opinion, are absolutely forbidden us, even towards the enemies of the gospel: and upon the whole, we do treat them with a moderation, which they are far from imitating. But still more gentle should we be to such, as believe christianity, but only misunderstand it: especially considering, that we are just as liable to mistake, as they. And it is a melancholy consideration, that whilst one part of those, who profess our religion, are so cool about its general and essential interests; most of the other are so immoderately warm about their own particular systems and persuasions. Not only the maintainers of established opinions are apt to judge hardly of the rigid opposers of them, and they to return it: but many, of greater latitude, cry out for liberty to themselves, though they enjoy it to the full, with a spirit of persecution: and whilst they claim an unbounded allowance for every new notion, will give none to those, who retain the old; but throw imputations or contempt upon them, without equity or mercy. What can be the consequence of this, but what we experience: that the bitter things which we say of one another, unbelievers, with seemingly good reason, will say after us: and when we have taught them to condemn the several sorts of christians, and especially their teachers, as the worst of men, will, by a very plausible inference, condemn christianity, as the worst of religions? How zealously soever therefore contending parties may *boldly* *say* what they profess; yet, violating the most indisputable duties by their vehemence for disputable doctrines, they provoke great numbers to sit loose to all profession; and do incredible harm to the religion, which they would serve. For, let us try what methods we will, nothing can ever so effectually promote true faith, as joining to practise true charity. But however unanimous christians may be in other respects, they will neither do honour to the gospel, nor receive benefit from it, unless they are also careful,

* Jude 3.

5. To be seriously and uniformly pious and virtuous. Yet, most unhappily, whatever else we differ in, we agree but too well in neglecting this. Multitudes call themselves christians, who seem never to have thought of any care of their conduct ; but make a solemn profession of the purest and holiest religion, that ever was ; and at the same time, throughout their live, do every thing that they are inclined to, and nothing else. Others that will observe some restraints, would find, upon a fair examination, that they follow their passions, perhaps in as many or more cases, than their principles ; or, which comes to the same thing, accommodate their principles to suit their passions. And even they, who have little of any bad inclination to lead them wrong, are very frequently led almost as wrong by indolent compliance with bad custom. For from whence is it, that the generality of men form their rule of behaviour ? Not from scripture, or from reason : but from fashion and common practice : whatever they find people of tolerable reputation do, that they do likewise. When a farther step of wrong indulgence is publicly taken, they proceed to take the same ; or, it may be, one somewhat less : the duties, which others throw off intirely, they practise rarely, and with indifference : the liberties, which others indulge without reserve, they approach towards with hesitation and by degrees ; but as the world goes on from bad to worse, they go on too ; and imagine they are perfectly safe, because they are a little behind. Now men should not indeed be superstitiously scrupulous : but they should be conscientiously attentive to their hearts and lives ; and reflect what ought to be done, as well as observe what is done. The gospel forbids, instead of recommending, *conformity to the world** ; by no means with an intention, that we should be singular in matters of indifference, but resolute against compliances unlawful or dangerous. Christians, far from being permitted to follow others into sin, are designed to lead them into piety and virtue : to be *the light, the salt of the earth*† : not to set an example of useless rigour, much less of uncharitable censoriousness ; but of punctual and impartial adherence to every rule, which God hath appointed by reason or scripture, and faithful endeavours to attain the great end of his appointments : for without that, the exactest outward regularity is empty form. *Now the end of the commandment is charity,*

* Rom. xii. 2.

† Matth. v. 13, 14.

ty, out of a pure heart and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned*: a sincere spirit of love and reverence towards our Maker, our Redeemer and Sanctifier; of justice and goodness to our fellow-creatures, of reasonableness and moderation, with respect to the advantages and enjoyments of the present life; for in these things consists our fitness for a better. This then is the real temper of christianity. And if we have either never felt it; or perceive ourselves declining and deviating from it; our hearts growing fond of worldly objects, and sinking down into that supine disregard to God and our duty, and a judgement to come, which is undeniably the prevailing, and likely to be the fatal, distemper of the present age: our case and our remedy are plainly laid down in that awful exhortation to the church of Sardis: *I know thy works; that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful; and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.—Remember, how thou hast received and heard; and hold fast, and repent. If thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief: and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.* But then to do this effectually, we must obey the whole injunction of the text: and not only *hold fast that which is evidently good*, but,

6. and lastly, *Abstain from all appearance of evil.* It might be translated, from every kind of evil. But even then, the sense would be much the same. For though doing what we know to be wrong is a grosser kind of wickedness: yet doing what appears to us wrong, though we are not sure of it, is a real kind: and, even were we absolutely doubtful, still, if taking one course may be acting amiss, and taking the contrary cannot; the general rule certainly is, to lean always towards the securer side: for why should we run into danger needlessly? And yet what numbers of miserable creatures are there, whom the observance of this one direction would have made happy: who saw the safe path, but would prefer the pleasing one; exulted in it for a while, then were ensnared of a sudden, and lost perhaps for ever! Nor is it pleasure only, but interest, power, vanity, resentment, every thing within us and around us, in its turn, that may endanger our innocence, by tempting us to venture upon what we hope, but are not satisfied, is lawful. *Go not therefore in a way, wherein thou may-*

*est fall; be not confident in a plain way**. Even such actions, as appear to us very allowable, yet, if they appear evil to others, it is, ordinarily speaking, both our prudence and our duty to abstain from, as much as, with tolerable convenience, we can. Whatever indeed, on mature consideration, we are fully persuaded we ought to do, that we must do, let the world think as it will. But where we apprehend a thing to be only permitted: if the wise will disapprove it, or the injudicious misinterpret it; if the good will be afflicted, or the bad rejoice at it; if rigid and warm tempers will be guilty of censuring us for it rashly; or easy and complying ones follow us in it, against their judgements; if our taking harmless liberties will encourage others to take sinful ones: in short, if any how, by doing what otherwise we might, we shall induce any one else to do what he ought not: the great law of christian charity requires, *that no man put a stumbling-block, or occasion to fall, in his brother's way*; or do any thing, whereby he is grieved, or offended, or made weak†. Showing this tender care neither to intice nor provoke a single person, if it can be avoided, into sin of whatever sort, but to *please our neighbour for his good, to edification*‡, is a precept, I believe, peculiar to the gospel: or at least, hath so peculiar a stress laid on it there, as to distinguish our religion, greatly to its honour, from every other institution of life, that the world hath known.

After such an addition to all the rest, there cannot be a completer provision imagined, by rules of behaviour, for the virtue, the peace, the eternal felicity of mankind. And therefore nothing remains, but what must depend on ourselves; that, having the best and fullest directions, the noblest promises, the most gracious helps, we think seriously, while it is time, what use we ought to make, and what we do make, of these advantages. The word of God will show us the first: our own consciences, if honestly consulted, will tell us the latter. Happy are they in the highest degree, who can stand the comparison of the two: and happy they, in the next place, whom a deep sense, that at present they cannot, excites effectually to earnest supplications, and faithful endeavours, that they soon may. I conclude therefore with the words following my text. *The very God of Peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul and body, be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*§.

S E R.

* Ecclus xxxii. 20, 21.

† Rom. xv. 2.

‡ Rom. xiv. 13, 15, 21.

§ 1 Thess. v. 23.

S E R M O N XLVI.

THE MEANNESS AND FALSENESS OF THE COMMON EXCUSES
FOR IRRELIGION AND IMMORALITY.

LUKE xii. 57.

Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?

THE duties, which God hath enjoined us, though reasonable and beneficial in the highest degree, are yet, through the depravity of human nature, and the prevalence of bad customs, become so unacceptable, that they are practised, as we must be sensible, but imperfectly by the best, and very little by the largest part of the world. Yet avowedly to neglect doing what they ought, is too shocking a behaviour to sit easy upon the minds of men. Some plea therefore they must find out, either to justify, or at least to excuse, their manner of life. And various are, and ever have been, the excuses, invented by the irreligious and immoral, not only to maintain some character amongst others, but chiefly to quiet themselves.

Now of all these, one of the best, if it were a true one, would be that of ignorance: not knowing that such and such things are incumbent on us. This appears to be a case, to which not only compassion must have regard, but which even justice itself must acquit of guilt. And therefore it is no wonder, if many shelter themselves under so favourable a pretence.

The lower part of mankind, in general, on almost every occasion, alledge, that they have not the advantages of education and instruction which others have: that they are not able, perhaps even to read that holy book, in which their duty is set forth: and if they be, yet the same quickness to understand it, or leisure to study it, cannot be looked for from them, as if their minds had been improved by rules of reasoning and

judging, and their time at their own disposal. A great deal they think may be required, with the utmost reason, from those of higher rank : but from such as they are, little or nothing.

But, besides this vulgar sort, there is also a learned kind of ignorance, pleaded by some, whose freedom of inquiry and superior sagacity hath given them cause, they apprehend, to be very diffident of many points, that others are firmly persuaded of. And therefore they argue, that though it may be the duty of common people, who, for want of the means of knowledge or of abilities to use them, must believe what they are taught ; though it may be right and necessary for them, in consequence of their belief, to practise virtue and piety very conscientiously : yet it must not be expected, that those of greater genius, who are more enlightened, and perceive many doubts in these matters, should put themselves under disagreeable restraints, merely on account of uncertain speculations ; and conform their lives to the rigid precepts of christianity, when they are really not well satisfied of the authority of it ; nor, it may be, even of natural religion.

Thus, you see, the lowest incapacity and the highest self-opinion can urge in effect the same argument, to evade what men have no mind to. And I shall now show, that in both it is inconclusive ; and fully confuted by our Saviour's home question, *Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right ?*

These words appear, by the parallel places in the other Evangelists, to have been originally designed against those amongst the *Jews*, who, from dislike of the strictness of our blessed Lord's morality, pretended ignorance of his divine mission, after he had given abundant proofs of it ; when yet, without any separate proofs of it at all, the main things which he taught, carried their own evidence along with them, and every man's heart bore witness to their truth. They had seen miracles of various kinds, performed in attestation of his claim : yet still they were not content without more, and those of their own chusing. *The Pharisees came forth, with the Sadducees also, tempting him, and sought of him a sign from heaven**. But he, with no less dignity than prudence, refused to gratify a curiosity, both ill-meaning and endless : and *sighing deeply*

* Matth. xvi. 1, Mark. viii. 11.

deeply in his spirit, as St Mark informs us*, at this perverse disposition of theirs; told them, with a kind, because needful, severity of speech, where the defect lay. *A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign†*: your sinful inclinations and lives, not the want or the desire of sufficient evidence, prompt you to this demand: and *verily I say unto you, there shall be no sign given*, no such visible manifestation of divine glory as you insolently require, vouchsafed *to this generation†*: nor is it requisite. *When ye see a cloud rise out of the west, straightway ye say, there cometh a shower, and so it is. And when ye see the south wind blow, ye say there will be heat, and it cometh to pass. Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth: but how is it that ye do not discern this time?* That is: on other occasions you appear very able to judge of things by the proper indications of them. How can you then, with any colour of sincerity, pretend, that amidst so many prophecies fulfilled, and so many miracles performed, you have not, after all, sufficient conviction, that this is the season when the Messiah should appear, and that I am he? Nay, as to the principal part of my doctrine, which is the real cause of your antipathy to the whole; as to the great precepts of pure religion and uniform virtue, and your need of repentance and faith in God's mercy; what occasion is there for any farther demonstrations of them, than your own hearts, if honestly consulted, will not fail to afford? *Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?*

Now this method of reasoning is equally applicable to unbelievers and cavillers in all ages. It is in vain for them, to invent new difficulties, or magnify old ones, concerning the authority of our religion; while the reason of things, the truth of facts, and the nature of God and man continue to exhibit so full proof of those fundamental articles of it, the eternal obligation of moral duties, the sinfulness of every one's nature and life, the necessity of repentance, and humble application for pardon and grace.* And, since the true quarrel of such persons is against these doctrines, and these cannot be shaken; they had much better reconcile themselves to the whole, than make fruitless attacks upon one part; in which if they were to succeed, (as they never will) they would, in point of argument,

* Verse 12.

Matth. xvi. 4.

† Mark viii. 12.

§ Luke xii. 54, 55, 56.

ment, be almost as far from their favourite scheme, of liberty to do what they please, and think highly of themselves notwithstanding, as they were before. Suppose there are some doctrines against which they can find more objections, than their neighbours: there are surely others, of which they can discern more clearly the certain grounds. If not, they have employed their imagined superior faculties to very ill purpose. Or, were they to doubt of ever so many points; yet, if they take pains for it, and force themselves to doubt, hunting every way for difficulties, asking for no solutions, and turning a deaf ear to them when offered; they have no more excuse for any part of their consequent wrong behaviour, than if they had no doubts at all. For the whole of their case is: they perplex things on purpose, in order to complain that they are not clear: walk with their eyes wilfully shut, and then insist, that they cannot be blamed, if they stumble; for it is quite dark, and they do not see a step of their way.

But let us now proceed to those, who acknowledge themselves, as many of the former would, if they had more modesty, the less knowing part of mankind. Some of these profess a second-hand sort of scepticism: built not so much on their own judgement, as that of their admired leaders just mentioned. But since the masters are indefensible, their implicit disciples must be yet more so. For, if the question is to be decided by the authority of men of letters and abilities, the greatest number and most eminent, beyond all comparison, have confessedly been always on the side of religion: even excluding the clergy, as interested in the case: which, however, is by no means thought a sufficient reason, in other professions, why men of known skill and probity should be disregarded, in what they unanimously affirm, after careful examination.

But the generality of the unlearned confess the obligation of christianity most readily; yet daily transgress its laws: and, when they are charged with their fault, plead ignorance, as we have seen, amongst other things, especially the lower part of them, to excuse their disobedience to the clearest revelation of God's will, that the world ever knew; and whose early distinction it was that *the poor had the gospel preached to them**. Why then may we not say to such, as our Saviour said to the Jews; *Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the*
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* Matth. xi. 5.

sky and of the earth! You can judge in all the common affairs of life. You can attain to a competent skill, many times to great perfection, in your several employments, and trades: though attended with many difficulties, and requiring much application and dexterity. You can foresee, at a distance, what will make for your worldly interest, or against it: you can lay schemes, full of cunning and long reach, for guarding against dangers, retrieving losses, securing and improving advantages. What hinders you then from arriving at the knowledge of religion; which consists in things much easier to be understood: love and reverence to God, justice and goodness to your fellow-creatures, reasonable and virtuous government of yourselves, humble recourse to the divine mercy when you have done amiss, and faithful use of the divine assistance to amend? If you have instructions in the management of business, and the wisdom of this world: have you not instruction also in the precepts of a christian life? One day in seven of your time, at least, you are not only allowed, but enjoined, to spend principally in learning and thinking of your duty. The word of God is read to you, if you are not able to read it yourselves: it is explained to you, if it be not already plain enough: and the most important parts are the plainest of all. The several articles of christian faith and practice are taught you in your earliest childhood; and imprinted on your memory at the time, when impressions are most lasting. They are afterwards more distinctly proposed to you from this place, week after week; and enforced on you by motives no less powerful, than the love of eternal happiness and the dread of eternal misery. There is no sin you practise, no good action you omit, but you are publicly warned, at one time or another, of your fault, and the danger of it; and there is no doubt or scruple, that can disquiet you, concerning any branch of your behaviour, but you may open your case often to your more learned and more prudent neighbours, always to the ministers of God's word, and receive satisfaction about it. What possible room is there left then for pleading ignorance of your Lord and Master's will? This is a description of the means of knowledge with which the lowest and meanest among believers are provided. And even to these may be applied, though not in an equal degree, yet with great truth, what our Saviour declared to his immediate disciples: *Verily I say unto you, that*
many

*many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things that which we hear, and have not heard them: but blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear**. Ignorant and knowing are comparative terms: and men usually compare themselves with those that are next them only; and draw false conclusions from doing so. A christian, of smaller opportunities for improvement than some of his fellow-christians, thinks every thing ought to be forgiven him for that reason. And yet, in reality, not only the admired sages of heathen antiquity, but the patriarchs that were favoured with communications from heaven, the prophets and penmen of scripture under the Jewish dispensation, nay the immediate fore-runner of our blessed Lord himself, who saw him and conversed with him on earth, had less means of acquaintance with the doctrines of religion, than the poorest disciple of Christ now may have, if he will. *Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of woman, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist; notwithstanding, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven, in the gospel age, is greater than he*†.

But it may be imagined perhaps, that the benefits of religious instruction are partially represented, and spoken of much too highly, by those who are concerned in dispensing them. Why, be it so then. Let us lay aside for a while the consideration of what you learn here. Your Maker hath by no means trusted you intirely to our care: but hath appointed your parents, your friends, every serious person around you, for your instructors too: nay, to co-operate with all these, he hath placed a faithful witness and monitor of his truths in every breast; and therefore the want of outward helps can never justify transgressors. What *Moses* said in God's name to the Jews, is true in relation to all men: *The commandment which I command thee this day, not bidden from thee, neither is it far off; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it*‡. And what *Isaiab* said of christianity, holds in proportion of natural conscience: *An high way shall be there; and it shall be called the way of holiness; the way-faring men, though fools, shall not err therein*§. The duties

* Matth. xiii. 16.

† Matth. xi. 11.

‡ Deut. xxx. 11, 14.

§ Is. xxx. 8.

duties of mankind are not so intricate and perplexed, but that a good heart, without a very sagacious head, may easily find its way through them. For the confirmation of this, let us take a view of the fundamental parts of practical religion; those which men are most apt to fail in; and see which of them all any one can fairly say he was ignorant of, or doubtful about, and had not the means of sufficient light to direct his steps.

To begin with the belief and worship of almighty God. Is not every man capable of seeing, let him be ever so little acquainted with nature, that the heavens and the earth, the order of the seasons, the returns of day and night, the whole frame of things in general, is full of use and beauty; and must be the work of amazing power, wisdom and goodness? Doth not every man feel, that he is frail and dependent, that his life and being is not owing to himself, nor consequently, that of his parents to them, and therefore they all proceed from a superior cause? Doth not every man perceive, that he is *fearfully and wonderfully made**; that the several parts of his composition are exactly fitted to the several purposes of life; the eye for seeing, the ear for hearing, each member for its respective end? And his inward inclinations and affections no less so, than his outward limbs? Must not every man be sensible, that the supports and conveniencies, which he enjoys, are not supplied him merely by his own care; but chiefly by the providence of another, *who maketh his sun to rise†, his wind to blow‡, his rain to descend*, his earth to be fruitful? Hath not every man heard it owned, that the more diligently any one part of nature is examined, the fuller proofs it affords, that an almighty, allwise and gracious being, must be the author of the whole? And what he hath made, no doubt but he governs and superintends. This is the plain obvious account of things, that one should think must almost offer itself of course to every common mind, without any learning at all: and the deepest learning gives it the strongest confirmation. Nor is it so much as pretended, that any account hath been attempted of the origin of the world, or any thing in it, different from what religion assigns, but it hath been either palpably false and absurd, or impenetrably dark and unintelligible. It being then so clear, that there is a maker and preserver of all,

VOL. II.

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* Ps. cxxxix. 14.

† Matth. v. 45.

‡ Ps. cxlvii. 18.

infinitely powerful, wise and bounteous, what can be more visible than our duty; to praise him for his mercies, pray to him for the continuance of them, place our happiness in his favour, fear his displeasure, and do his will? Surely the most ignorant among us, that think at all, cannot but find all this written in their hearts: nor can the acutest and most artful dispute against it, without being self-condemned. And what then hath any one to plead for himself, if he lives regardless of him, *in whom he lives, and moves, and hath his being**; without gratitude to his bounty, from whom all he hath, or can hope for, comes; without obedience to his commands, who requires nothing of us, but for our own good; without resignation to his will, who is rightful Lord of the universe, and uses boundless authority only to the purpose of infinite goodness? surely, as the apostle reasons, since *the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and Godhead, are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things that are made; they are without excuse, who, when they know God, glorify him not as God, neither are thankful†*.

Let us now proceed to the duties, which we owe to our fellow-creatures. The sense of these, because they are of more immediate importance to the good of society, God hath imprinted with greater strength on our minds, than even that of our obligations to himself. As it must be the will of him, who is so just and good to us all, that we should be just and good to one another; and from this principle, as the root, every branch of right behaviour springs: so he hath planted in our hearts a natural love of equity, a natural feeling of kind affection; a natural conscience, applauding us when we act according to these dispositions, condemning us when we violate them: and seldom do we deserve its reproaches, but either at the time, or soon after, we undergo them. Consider but a little more particularly, what the mutual duties of men are: Honesty and fairness in their dealings, truth in their words, friendliness in their demeanor, willingness to forgive offences, respectful obedience to superiors, ready condescension to inferiors, tender love to near relations, pity and relief of the poor, diligent care to be serviceable to mankind in our proper station. Which one of these obligations (and all the rest are like them,

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* Acts xvii. 28.

† Rom. i. 20, 21.

can any pretend he was ignorant of, or doubtful about? Who of us all hath ever done an unjust, a hard, an ill-natured, a passionate, an undutiful, an insolent, action; or lived an idle, useless life; and can truly say, he was not sensible that he did amiss? We all know, when others do amiss in these respects: and therefore we are very capable of knowing, when we do so ourselves. We may drown the voice of conscience in turbulent passions and vehement pursuits of profit or pleasure; we may coolly and deliberately refuse to obey it: but it will speak, and from time to time will be heard. And therefore it is not ignorance or doubt, but wickedness of heart and *bolding the truth in unrighteousness**, that makes us negligent of, and injurious to each other, so often as we are.

The third part of our duty is the government of ourselves, according to the rules of sobriety, temperance and chastity. Now who doth not know, that the observance of these virtues is right and fit: that the violation of them is prejudicial to the reason, the health, the reputation, the fortunes, the families of men, and introduces riot and madness, confusion and misery into the world? Who doth not see, that superiority to the cravings of appetite, and scorn of irregular gratifications, is a worthy, an honourable character: and that excess, dissoluteness and debauchery hath something low and shameful in it: and still more so, as, by habitual indulgence, men come to be less ashamed of it? Can any one say, he did not know, that gluttony and drunkenness and promiscuous lewdness were sins: but thought them as consistent with the obligations of a rational nature, the good order of society, and the commands of his Maker, as moderation and self-denial? And if no man is capable of mistaking thus, why is not *the judgement of God according to truth, against them which commit such things*†?

But further yet: Doth not every man know in his conscience, that, plain as his duties to God, his fellow-creatures and himself, are, he hath, more or less transgressed them all; that he hath a nature continually prone to transgression; that therefore he needs both pardon for what is past, and assistance for the time to come; and that he can have neither, but through God's undeserved mercy? Or, however ignorant men left to their own reason may be through carelessness and wickedness, as they were indeed amazingly ignorant; or, whatever

* Rom. i. 18.

† Rom. ii. 2.

doubts they had, after sinning, concerning their forgiveness and acceptance, as they could not help having great doubts: yet at least must not every professor of the gospel be sensible, both what he is to do, and what he may promise himself on complying with the terms which it proposes: and that these are, *repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ**, and humble use of the appointed means of grace: of attention to the reading and preaching of God's word, earnest prayer, worthy participation of the holy sacrament? And how can he then plead ignorance hereafter, if he resolves now to live according to his own fancy, and to stand or fall by his own merits: and haughtily despises, or indolently neglects, applying, as a penitent sinner ought, to infinite goodness?

Upon the whole, since most of the main branches of our duty are thus obvious to our understandings of themselves; and all of them are constantly taught us, by the holy scripture, by the laws of our country, by the opinion and consent of the wisest and best of mankind, by the instructions of persons appointed for that purpose; what account do we imagine we shall possibly be able to give, why religion, so easily apprehended, is so little practised by us? If any do not know what is commanded; it must be, because they avoided knowing it: if any doubt of the reality of the command; the reason is, that they desire to doubt: and how can we flatter ourselves, that any thing is excusable, which proceeds from a disposition of mind so grossly and wilfully wrong? suppose a servant of ours had purposely kept out of the way of receiving our orders, or invented perplexities and cavils about the meaning of them, or the certainty of our having delivered them, because he had no mind to obey them: would that justify him? Should we not immediately tell him, that what he easily might and clearly ought to have known and understood, he was inexcusable, if he would not know and understand? And what must we think of our great master in heaven, if we try to impose on him with devices and tricks, that will not pass amongst ourselves?

But in reality men have not this excuse, if it were one. They do know, how they ought to behave; they do know that they ought to *live soberly, righteously and godly, in this world, looking for† the recompences of another*: and they well

* Acts xx. 21.

† Tit. ii, 12, 13.

well know in the main, what particulars this obligation comprehends; how grievously they have fallen short of them, and what need they have to repent and humbly beg forgiveness and strength, through him who hath procured us a title to both. Nor can they pretend, that these are trifling matters: the happiness even of this life depends on them; or, if it did not, the all-seeing God hath enjoined them, as the conditions and the means of happiness in the next; the judge of the whole earth will inquire strictly at the great day into our performance of them; and there can be no good account given him, why a pain duty was omitted or transgressed. We can easily deceive ourselves: we can make specious pleas one to another for our failings; which the occasion that we have for allowances in our turn, incline us often to look upon very favourably in our neighbours. But, in the sight of God, supposing a thing incumbent on us, and supposing it easily known to be so; what can be said to the purpose, why we did not perform it? "We were poor and ignorant." But we were not, or we needed not to have been, ignorant in this particular. "We were suspicious and doubtful." But our doubts were affected, not real; or partial, not honest and upright. Or if we doubted ever so fairly about some things; why did not we do those, of which we could not doubt? And even for the rest, why did we not take care, that our practice should be on the undoubtedly safer, that is, the virtuous and religious, side? But we had strong inclinations, that prompted us to the course we took. No wonder: here was the trial of our virtue: it was our business to have resisted them. "But human virtue is not sufficient:" Therefore we should have applied earnestly for divine grace. "But we were surprised into wrong behaviour." It was our business to be watchful; and at least a habit and a life of sin cannot happen by surprise. In short, let us multiply pretences as long as we please, the very nature of duty implies, that it ought to be done.

Still there are some, especially in some circumstances, who are to a much greater degree excusable for the sins they are guilty of, than others. But yet all excuse is not a justification: and will least of all prove such to those, who, instead of endeavouring to act right, set themselves to contrive reasons, why their acting wrong should be dispensed with. It is true, the very best have their faults: and faults not indulged shall

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be forgiven us, if we are truly sorry for them, and earnestly apply to God's mercy through Christ for pardon, and carefully watch against the return of them. But when men first allow themselves to sin, then stand on their own defence; and particularly, if they plead ignorance or doubtfulness of what they have such abundant means of knowing and being sure of: they must not hope, that this conduct, if they persevere in it, can escape final condemnation.

It ought however to be acknowledged after all, that many have comparatively but low abilities, and small opportunities for knowledge: and that to some, whose understandings are not weak, but perversely turned, greater opportunities are of small use; for what enlightens others, only dazzles them. And accordingly our Saviour most equitably considers these disadvantages; and acquaints us, ten verses before the text, that *the servant, which knew his Lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes: but he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes**. But these words, though full of terror to the great, the learned and the wise, if they neglect their duty; by no means carry in them that encouragement to the poor, the illiterate and slow of apprehension, which possibly they may seem to do. For they chiefly relate, not to such times as ours; but that in which they were spoken: when the Jews had great light, and therefore great guilt if they sinned; but the Gentiles were, and had been long, in profound darkness: *the time of which ignorance God is represented, as in comparison winking at; but now, in the gospel age, he commands, under severer penalties, all men every where to repent; because he hath given them a clearer knowledge of his pleasure, and a fuller assurance of his judging the world in righteousness*†. And yet it must be observed, our Saviour did not apprehend any one to have been so ignorant, even then, of his master's will, as to escape being punished for transgressing it; but declares, that he who knew the least of it; *he who*, compared with others, *knew it not*; knew enough however to deserve being *beaten with stripes*; though fewer, than they should undergo, who, with stronger conviction and distincter perceptions of their duty, were equally transgressors of it. And how severe even the mildest

punishments

* Luke xii. 47, 48.

† Acts xvii. 30, 31.

punishments of a wicked life may be, God forbid we should any of us try. For whoever sins wilfully in hopes of suffering but little hereafter; for that very reason will be made to suffer a great deal.

The conclusion of the whole matter is, that we have reason all to apply to ourselves the prophet's words: *He hath shewn thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord thy God requireth of thee**. And though it still be true, that some ages of the world have been dark, and others blinded with false lights; that some men naturally see little, and others are strangely given to see wrong: yet, in general, the duties of life are level to the capacities of all men: and especially among christians, but above all, christians so peculiarly blessed with the means of instruction, as we of this nation are, no one can possibly, without either deliberate obstinacy, or intolerable negligence, continue unacquainted with what he is bound to do: or the recompence he is to expect, if he do it not. *For this is the condemnation; that light is come into the world, and men have loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil*†.

* Micah vi 8.

† John iii. 19.

SERMON XLVII.

THE FOLLY AND MISERY OF SENSUAL INDULGENCES.

2 TIM. iii. 4.

—*Lovers of pleasures, more than lovers of God.*

THE wise and gracious ruler of the world hath created us to obey him, and from that obedience to receive our proper share of happiness. He hath adapted a variety of satisfactions to the various parts of our frame : and taught us by nature, but more distinctly by his word, the due subordinations of each; and the circumstances, in which we may or may not lawfully partake of them. Some of these are capable of being exactly specified : and in such we cannot transgress, without either acknowledging our guilt, or daring to deny the authority of the law. Many take the humbler method of the two ; and yet grow little, if at all, better : many the bolder, and grow continually worse. Both are frequently admonished, and may be left at present to their own reflections. But other cases admit only a general and less accurate description ; which leaves room for those, who desire it, to go very improper lengths, and still imagine they are within bounds. Thus, in eating and drinking ; to use the good creatures of God with delight is certainly allowable : and therefore too many set their minds to a strange degree on the practice and the study of this meanest of gratifications ; and think they may load and inflame themselves without scruple, provided they stop but at all short of shocking intemperance. Thus again what we commonly call amusements are in their nature innocent. God hath formed us for pleasing intercourse, and put mirth in our hearts with intent that we should exert it. The sprightly disposition of youth calls for gladsome activity : the fatigues of business,

business, the infirmities of old age, the wearisomness of ill health and low spirits, often require the best relief, that chearfulness can minister. And not to allow that our Maker considers *whereof we are made**, would be giving an idea of religion both unamiable and false. But then, just how far each of us may lawfully carry our indulgence, cannot be minutely pointed out. And therefore, instead of being contented to speak and think mildly of others, which would be a right use of this uncertainty; we are apt to be negligent of restraining ourselves; which is a very wrong one. For there are numberless things, in which limits cannot be fixed precisely, and yet considerable excesses are destructive. Now in all these, our ignorance ought to teach us a reasonable, though not scrupulous, caution: but especially in matters of gay entertainment; because the present age hath confessedly a peculiar turn that way. Whether the preceding ones had not other faults as bad is out of the question: our concern is to watch against our own: for which purpose the text affords us a most equitable and comprehensive and trying direction; that we are not to *love pleasures more than God*: meaning, than our duty to him. For, *this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments*†. Now he hath enjoined us very important duties: of improving ourselves in every thing worthy, and being serviceable to our fellow-creatures. What influence then upon these will our amusements, as we conduct them, have?

The more steadily we apply, without impairing our healths or faculties by it, to affairs of real use, the properer part we act in life. Do then indeed our serious occupations wear us down so, that we need all the time, which we take, to recruit ourselves? Or do we only, when we are tired of one trifle, run to another? Is it matter of humiliation to us, that we are obliged to spend so much of every day insignificantly: or do we take a pride in spending it thus; lead as many into the same way as we can, and throw contempt on those, whom we cannot? Have we impartially examined, what obligations, public and private, are incumbent on us: whether we are chiefly attentive to these, omitting none; or to what other things, and what the benefit of them is: whether it be any other, than keeping ourselves in humour, like froward children? We should do well to state the disposal of our time: first set

VOL. II.

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down,

* Ps. ciii. 14.

† 1 John v. 3.

down, how much we employ in each of our concerns of moment; then how much goes in diversions of one kind or another, in preparing for them, in refreshment after them, in needless company at home and abroad; and, if the disproportion be great, think beforehand, how wretched a void and blank, at best, our lives will appear at the close of them to have been, should the remainder of them be wasted in the same manner.

We all wish to be distinguished to our honour. But in whose eyes will such persons, or a nation composed of such, be honoured? and for what qualifications? Knowledge and prudence require industry and experience to attain them; worth and probity require thoughtful self-inspection. And one doth not see, how they, who claim only outside pre-eminences, can possibly esteem one another; or why they should wish to herd so much together, unless to take comfort in their mutual want of merit. At least vain opinion will never convert shew into substance. We must surely know, that we are capable of more valuable accomplishments, and of delighting in them. Probably our education hath furnished us with some experience of improving our understandings and our tempers. Have we no room left then for farther improvements? Or have we lost the relish of them? And for what better have we exchanged it? Or how unhappily soever we were bred, as indeed too many young people are extremely pitiable for having been taught the least of what was most worth learning; yet we must be sensible, there are those, who possess more solid endowments. Are they then of no value in life, or have they not in all ages been allowed to be of the highest? Why therefore should not we strive to resemble them, and take a little leisure to think, how we may live to more purpose? It may be, we do not desire leisure to think. It is unentertaining: it is painful. But what a figure do we make to others and ourselves, if we cannot bear our own company, but must fly to any thing, rather than fail to get rid of it? Thought can be painful only because we are acting amiss: and then thinking so as to amend, is the only remedy; and no case is too far gone for it. Perhaps we are unable to carry on solitary meditation to any good effect. But we can have recourse to the assistance of proper books. Idle reading indeed completes the destruction of the time, that idle conversation spares us. But judicious writings on the subject of conduct, religious, moral, and

and prudent, are at once the medicine and the nourishment of the mind. If still after these we want farther instruction, every true friend we have, every good man we consult, will gladly give it us. And with such helps, why should we not assert our share in the dignity of human nature?

But possibly we aspire to appear advantageously both in weightier matters, and lighter. And by due application, most people may, as far as they need. But then the chief regard must ever be paid to the principal point. For even elegant and liberal and learned accomplishments have, by excluding still better things, greatly diminished the value of many characters. And when such attainments, as barely, if at all, rise above indifferent, or perhaps sink below it, divide our esteem with laudable ones, the mixture will do great harm, both to ourselves, and, by its example, to others. But when they are the main objects of our ambition: the applause of the unthinking, should we procure it, will be bought much too dear; the soul will lose its vigour and grow frivolous; matters of consequence become distasteful; by degrees the very notion, which are so, will be effaced: and a group of the reigning follies of the time being, engross the heart. But particularly self-government will be forgotten in the midst of self-indulgences, that will pretend to be harmless, till they prove undeniably criminal. In these circumstances, the business of our stations, the examination of our affairs, the care of those who are most intimately connected with us, and, much more, the inspection of our hearts, of our state towards God, of our title to a happy eternity, will be continually postponed, or superficially hurried over, to comply with every trifling engagement, every sudden fancy, or even mere indolence. And perhaps, rather than take the pains of knowing and doing what we ought, we shall make it our refuge to profess a contempt of it: in which absurd declaration, a natural or acquired fluency of lively talk will bear people out so well to those, with whom similarity of manners prompts them to associate, that before it is long, they will seem quite satisfied in neglecting every thing they should mind.

Yet all the while, what they call a life of pleasure is very often only an affectation of being pleased. They put on airs of great gaiety, and in truth their pleasures are flat and insipid: they relieve one tasteless scene by another a little different; are miserable in the intervals of their amusements,

and far from happy during the continuance of them. Nay indeed, under colour of relaxations, they are, to those who engage thoroughly in them, fore fatigues ; from which, whether they will confess it or not, relaxation is much wanted : and some undergo a speedy, and many a lingering, martyrdom to them. If religion enjoined men to mortify and macerate themselves at this rate, what dreadful names would it be called ! In all likelihood, were the truth known, numbers would chuse a quieter way of living, if one part of them could be sure, that the other would keep them in countenance. It is great pity, therefore, but they should mutually explain themselves on this tyranny of fashion : and not go on together in wild chafes of imaginary pleasure, when they had all rather sit still. But farther, several, that would be sorry to quit their diversions, follow them only to banish reflection on some bad or imprudent thing that they have done, or course that they are in. Now as this can be no better than a palliative cure, and will usually exasperate the disease, they ought to seek a more effectual remedy. And we should all consider, that probably the same entertainments will not for ever afford us the same delight : and yet by long use it may grow or seem hardly possibly to do without them, though they not only misbecome, but even tire us. Nay some, when they have once fixed it in their minds, that happiness consists in gaiety, and find the innocent sorts of gay enjoyments are become tasteless, venture, for the sake of a higher relish, on such as are pernicious even in this world.

Another consideration, both of prudence and duty, is, that the many expences of this public sort of life are excessive ; and to supply them, creditors are frequently left unpaid, except the least deserving ; due provision for children is omitted, and ignominious arts of raising money practised. Or if the votaries of pleasure do observe justice, let them ask their consciences, what proportion of their income goes in works of piety, mercy, encouragement of useful undertakings, and what in luxurious trifles ? It will be said, that these last do good by setting the poor to labour. But is our intention to do good by them, or only to gratify our vanity and voluptuousness ? Besides, much more good is done by procuring health to the sick, right education to the young, instruction to the ignorant and vicious, or by durable works of general utility and national

tional honour. And employing the lower part of the people in ministering to the luxury of the higher, can no more enrich or support a kingdom, than employing the servants of a private family in the same manner, can enrich or support that.

But one fashionable expence must be particularly mentioned: that which bears the name, often very falsely, of play. Be it for ever so little, consuming much time in it, is the most unimproving and irrational employment that can be. But false shame and emulation frequently raise it to a very inconvenient and distressing height, even amongst those who profess to be moderate. And the lengths that others go, are the most speedily and absolutely ruinous of all things. The more calmly men bear their losses, the worse; if they are the less likely to leave off for it. But usually they feel most tormenting agitations: yet rush on to lose more, from a groundless hope of gain; and perhaps at length call in dishonesty to the aid of imprudence. I am unwilling to name the worst act of desperation, to which extravagant and vicious indulgences too frequently lead. But surely it cannot fail to be visible, that deliberately and presumptuously ending an immoral and mischievous life, by the impious and false bravery of a voluntary death, instead of an humble and exemplary penitence, is the completest rebellion against God, of which the heart of man is capable.

Another considerable ingredient in the favourite amusements of the world, are public spectacles. And provided regard be had to time and cost, they might be allowably and beneficially frequented, if they were preserved from tendencies dangerous to virtue. But failings in that article totally alter the nature of them; and gross failings reflect not only on our morals, but our taste. Indeed it is lamentable that, fond as we are of adopting the fashions and qualities of our neighbours, often much for the worse, we should not import what is praiseworthy in them, but suffer the most dissolute of them to excel us in the chastity of their dramatical representations: yet after all, were they ever so innocent, in proportion as they are trifling and insignificant, they are contemptible and unworthy of regard.

But the effects of less general amusements, even of those at our own houses, may be extremely hurtful, if they are the
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means of admitting persons of profligate conduct and principles into familiar conversation and acquaintance with others. For hence they will have the encouragement of finding, that they need not either amend or conceal their faults to be well received. The inconsiderate, that is, most people, seeing little or no difference made between good and bad characters, will persuade themselves on occasion, that there can be no great difference between good and bad actions. But the young, above all, will be likely to admire those, whom it extremely concerns them to abhor. For, in spite of the most prudent cautions, which however are not always given them, they are easily imposed on by a shewy appearance, joined with plausible talk. And the common talk of such assemblies, though it were never openly to assault virtue, which yet may be especially feared in such of them where people converse in disguises, and are or may seem unknown to each other, hath notwithstanding many things to undermine good principles, and weaken right sentiments, particularly the continual supposition on which this whole way of living is built, that entertainment is the business of our being. They whose only school is the world, will think so of course: and in such places cannot be safely contradicted. Possibly, with all this, there may be no immediate strong symptoms of much harm suffered in them. But still, as a course of sober intemperance may damage the health more, than great excesses now and then; so may a life, seemingly but a little too gay, corrupt the heart more, than a few acts of confessed immorality.

And besides the direct danger to morals, what influence will it have on piety? About that perhaps we are not solicitous. And yet the firm belief of a future recompence must be the best security of right behaviour in all circumstances. And the king of the whole earth cannot but require to have the due respect and homage he hath appointed paid him by his subjects, as necessary to preserve that obedience to his laws, without which it is impossible they should be happy. Yet the public worship of God, even on that day which he hath appropriated to it, is almost intirely neglected by the greatest part of those who live to amusements; and by many of them professedly and contemptuously; though possibly attending it might afford them some instruction, as well as express proper duty. Much less do they regard any other seasons, appointed for the
peculiar

peculiar exercise of seriousness: but, it may be, affect to crowd diversions into the most sacred week of it; either in wanton defiance of public authority and common decency, or in ostentation of their imagined superiority to vulgar ways of thinking. But surely others know as well as they, that outward observances in themselves are nothing. But still, by their effects, both in civil and religious matters, they are very important things: and may be useful to the wisest persons. Though, indeed, when there is a little weakness mixed with piety and virtue, they have no title to ridicule it, who are guilty of the numberless absurdities of dissoluteness or profaneness. And though the most innocent superstition should be separated from religion if it can, yet not with the hazard of rooting up both together.

But supposing we pay sufficient regard to these external proprieties, what disposition doth our attachment to pleasure leave us towards inward devotion? Do we pray to God in private? Is it with attention and reverence? And doth that regulate the rest of the day, or the rest of the day wear out the impression of that? Do we steadily think of our interest in the divine favour, and our approaching state after death, as our main concerns? And do we not only fear the Judge of all, but love the Father of Mercy, such as he hath exhibited himself to man, by giving his Son to die for us, and his Holy Spirit to move us to all good? Or hath not our manner of living deadened our feeling of these things, if ever we had any: and are we not proceeding to efface the small remnants of them? This is not the behaviour of a rational creature, of a penitent for sin, of a candidate for eternal felicity: there can arise from it no *meetness for the inheritance of the saints of light**, no susceptibility of spiritual happiness, no hope of *escaping the damnation of hell*†. Not only a few of our detached hours, but our whole being is God's, and to be employed as he approves. Our lawful daily business, nay our needful relaxations from it, we may humbly present to him, as part of what he designed us for. But can we offer up a series of nothing but idle dissipations, or worse, and beg him to accept of that? Our baptismal vow promised other things for us: the holy scripture hath prescribed us a very different sort of conduct: hath told us, that we

cannot

* Col. i. 12,

† Matth. xxiii. 33.

*cannot serve two masters**; that they, *who live in pleasure, are dead, while they live*†; that he, who delighted himself splendidly every day, and took this for his portion, *lift up his eyes in torment*‡. And are we then willing, both to fail of reward, and suffer punishment? Perhaps the latter may seem unjust, merely for spending our days in harmless diversions. But if otherwise they were harmless, would not a servant of ours merit punishing, who for his own gratification should obstinately neglect his allotted share of work in the family? Now we are the servants of our Maker: and he hath forewarned us, that a *slothful servant* shall be deemed a *wicked one*§.

But the life of those, who love pleasure more than God, is fuller of guilt, in proportion as it gives others a more public invitation to live in the same way. If the rich and great proclaim, that voluptuous amusements are their passion, and religion their contempt; as it will provoke the better part of their inferiors to think ill of them, which is a very undesirable thing, so it will incline the larger part, without thinking at all well of them, to imitate their example. For if they may behave so, the conclusion will be boldly drawn, that every one else may. And yet the effects of that persuasion must be insupportable. For how shall our domestics, and nearest relations, all we have concerns with, and the body of the people in general, be kept from every thing that is wrong and mischievous, in the midst of such numerous temptations, if they learn from us to make self-indulgence, unrestrained by the apprehensions of a future account, their governing principle? Our laws cannot be executed with rigour: and legislators and magistrates will not be thought in earnest, or, if they are, will be thought injurious, when they prohibit what the practice of too many of them shews, they look upon as the only happy life.

People of fashion, especially of that sex, which ascribes to itself the most knowledge, have nearly thrown off all observation of the Lord's day: perhaps keep such hours, that neither they, nor their families, can go to church, at least in one part of it: will vary those hours readily for any other purpose, but by no means for this. And when they have passed the morning and afternoon in neglect of piety, numbers of them pass the evening in what they know will be commonly interpreted, and the more for that neglect, an open contradiction

to

* Matth. vi. 24.

† 1 Tim. v. 6.

‡ Luke xvi, 19, 23,

§ Matth, xxv, 26.

to piety. Or if, to avoid scandal, they sometimes vouchsafe their attendance on divine service in the country, they seldom or never do it in town: where patterns of it are peculiarly needful; and from whence accounts of their behaviour will soon be spread to the remotest places where they have influence. Now by these means the Sunday, instead of being made, to those beneath them, the usefulest part of their time, by religious worship and instruction, reading and thought; as well as the pleasantest, by rest from labour and friendly intercourse; becomes the most pernicious. A large proportion of the tradesmen in these two cities usually spend the whole of it abroad in diversions, often vicious, always costly: and by affecting them then, get a ruinous taste for them throughout the week. The lower sort still are ambitious to follow them as close as they can, every day indeed, but on that especially: consume the beginning of it, in stupid sloth, the remainder in lewdness or drunkenness, which impair their faculties and destroy their health; besides intercepting the profits of their labour from those, whom it should maintain. And if they once come to think gaming also allowable on that only time, in which they have leisure for it; the losers will be yet more thoroughly undone and desperate, and the winners not the richer, but only the more debauched.

Every species of wickedness cannot fail to make a great progress amidst these licentious principles and practices: which are industriously propagated, both by the discourse of bad men, contrary to all common prudence, and in books also, published not only against revealed religion, (which they who disbelieve will few of them believe any, and none to any great purpose) but against a future recompence of human actions; and suited, in the manner of writing, to every reader, and, in the price, to every purchaser. Such as have learnt these lessons, will yield, and no wonder, to the present solicitation of each appetite and each fancy, be the consequences what they may. When they are distressed, they will venture on whatever crime they think may enable them to go on a little longer: they will endeavour to conceal a first crime by a second; and if at last they cannot evade punishment, they will despise it. For what is even death, which every one may make as easy as he pleases, if they neither hope nor fear any thing after it?

We of the clergy are principally concerned to oppose this torrent of impiety: and I trust we do it with faithful zeal. But the immediate answer to us is, that we are pleading our own cause; though indeed it is that of the public. And therefore the hearty concurrence of the laity, jointly countenancing, by their examples, their favours, their commendations, their reproofs, by reverence to religion, moderation in pleasures, frugality in expence, diligence in the business of every one's proper station, is highly necessary: and will complete the blessing of the fullest liberty, and most fatherly administration of government, that ever nation enjoyed; which otherwise we are in imminent danger of abusing, to our own deserved ruin.

Yet too great strictness may do harm, or disqualify for doing good: and according to circumstances, partaking of amusements, that otherwise are not eligible, may be very prudent: besides that some may be under such authority and direction, as may oblige them in duty to do what they cannot intirely approve. And then they should endeavour to do it both obligingly and gracefully: but always remember, that they are on slippery ground: never go farther, than is really innocent; never farther, than they need: much less, blame or despise those, who are unwilling or unqualified to bear a part with them: but carefully preserve a just preference for the higher order of obligations; be humble in the midst of pomp, attentive to serious reflections in the midst of gaiety; do all they can, without exposing themselves, to guard or bring back others; and seize every opportunity of promoting what is right, where too generally what is wrong abounds.

But they who are not called to enter far into the livelier scenes of this world, will do very commendably, to shew by facts, in a freer and opener manner, their settled persuasion that happiness consists in quite other matters; to shew, that they can enjoy themselves perfectly well, without having any relish for these; nay, can abstain from them without difficulty, though they have a relish for them. And the more they do so, keeping up their good humour, the more exemplary they are. But the clergy should be patterns of this abstinence beyond all others. For if instead of being grave and studious and laborious in our profession, we dissipate ourselves in vanities, or sink into luxurious delicacy or indolence;
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the awe of our character, and the weight of our preaching will be lost: the thoughtless will imagine they may safely step a little farther than we; and thus will fall into palpable sin: while the indifferent to religion and virtue will make it their boast, that we aim to be as like them as for shame we can; and will *blaspheme*, on our account, *the worthy name, by which we are called**.

Possibly so many cautions against fondness for pleasure may seem to leave those who regard them, in a very joyless and uneasy condition. But indeed they are only plain and very practicable rules for that discipline of our temper and conduct, which is necessary for our true happiness even here, and for true happiness even here, and for our eternal felicity hereafter. Christian piety allows us, under such regulations as are evidently reasonable, every enjoyment of sense, every delight of elegant taste, every exertion of social cheerfulness; and forbids nothing, but mischief, madness and misery. Then besides, it heightens to the utmost all the nobler satisfactions of the mind: that of sincere good will to all men: that of tender complacency in those, to whom we are united more nearly: whence proceed honourable esteem, and affectionate returns. Or, though we miss the regard we deserve from men, we shall have a reviving consciousness, that we have acted worthily, that we have laboured to promote goodness and happiness on earth, that the sins and sufferings of our fellow-creatures are not owing to us. This applauding testimony of our hearts will indeed be mixed with the grief of many failings: but also, with the assurance, that our heavenly Father forgives them, for the sake of our gracious Redeemer; with the experience, that he is enabling us to overcome them, by the grace of our inward Sanctifier, and preparing us daily for the blessedness, to which he invites us. For such mercies we cannot but love him, and whoever doth so, is in proportion beloved by him. The sense of this must give us great composure about every thing worldly, disdain of every thing vicious, and comfort in going through the very lowest and hardest acts of duty. We shall pass the days of our pilgrimage in as much delight as the nature of it affords: and when we come to our final abode, every capacity of spiritual enjoyment, to which we have improved

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ourselves

* James ii, 7.

ourselves here, shall be inconceivably augmented, and completely filled: we shall *be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of God's house, and drink of the river of his pleasures**. For in his presence is the fullness of joy, and at his right hand there are pleasures for evermore†.

* Psal. xxxvi. 8.

† Psal. xvi. 11.

S E R M O N XLVIII.

JESUS CHRIST THE AUTHOR AND FINISHER OF OUR FAITH,
AND A PERFECT PATTERN FOR OUR IMITATION.

HEB. xii. 2.

Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith: who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

DIRECTING our eye is necessary for guiding our steps; and therefore the apostle here directs the eye of our mind to Jesus Christ: whom if we so contemplate, as to learn what he was, and expects us to be, nothing will be wanting to carry us happily through the journey of life. And it may be useful to begin with considering his familiar manifestation of himself on earth, whence we shall naturally be led to consider his higher and more awful glories.

Now in this lowest view, we shall find him to have been the most amiable and the most venerable person, beyond all comparison, that the world ever knew. Meditate only with serious attention on the evidently artless account given of him in the gospels, and you will see, with an admiration continually increasing, how perfect his character was in every point: how warm his sentiments, yet how just his notions, of piety to his heavenly Father; how strong and affectionate his expressions of it; yet how rational, and how peculiarly suitable to his very peculiar situation: how composed his resignation, though with the acutest feeling of all that he underwent; and how firm his trust in God even at the hour of death, under the most painful sense of the light of his countenance
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being withdrawn from him : how regular his practice of the whole of religion, yet how accurate his preference of one part of it to another : how active and bold and persevering his zeal ; yet how completely free from all the weakness, and all the bitterness, with which zeal is too often accompanied ; how intimately tempered with patience towards the flow of apprehension ; esteem for the well-meaning though erroneous ; pity for the bad, though perverse and incorrigible : what perpetual demonstrations he gave, of benevolence and purity in his teaching, of goodness and condescension, meekness and tenderness, in his behaviour, to all persons, however provoking, on all occasions, however trying : yet goodness judiciously exercised, condescension with dignity, meekness with due severity against sin, tenderness without partiality, or improper compliances, to the nearest of his kindred, or the dearest of his disciples : how compassionate a love he shewed to his country ; yet how unlimited a good-will to all the world : how remote he was from self-indulgence, yet how far from encouraging useless rigour and austerity : how diligently he turned the thoughts of the multitude, from empty admirations of his discourses or his works, to the conscientious performance of their own duties : declined the most favourable opportunities of rising to worldly power, and inculcated on his followers the strongest warnings of what he and they were to suffer : with what plainness he reproved both the people and their rulers, yet with what care he secured the respect owing from the former to the latter : with what simplicity and upright prudence he answered the objections and captious questions levelled against him, however suddenly attacked by them ; and though in so public a life tried every way continually, never once was overcome, never once disconcerted : how surprisingly he avoided all the artifices and all the violence of his enemies, as long as he chose it ; and how much superior, not only to them, but, if possible, even to himself, he appeared, after he had put himself into their hands, during the whole of their barbarous and despiteful treatment. Nor can it fail to be observed, as a most important circumstance, that all his wonderful perfections were evidently natural to him, and set absolutely easy upon him, without the least variation, or inequality, or effort exerted to raise himself up to, or support, the highest excellence, that he ever displayed. In short, the character of
Jesus

Jesus Christ, like the frame of God's creation, the more deeply it is studied, the more respectfully it will be admired. Some small particulars in each, yet much fewer than superficial observers imagine, it may be easier to cavil at, than to account for distinctly : but look at the whole of either, and to every eye that is capable of taking in a whole, it will approve itself uniformly great and good.

Now that he, of whom these things are recorded, was a real man, and not a phantom of the imagination, infidelity itself hath never denied. And that he was truly the excellent man, that the gospels describe him to have been, we have the testimony of numbers that knew him, of more who conversed with those that knew him ; who all asserted it in the strongest terms, and suffered every thing terrible for so doing. Their enemies were never able to disprove them : if they had, christianity must have sunk : and indeed some of the most considerable of their enemies, in all ages, have owned them to be so far in the right. But if still it be pretended, that his portrait was drawn too favourably ; who could draw it so ? The *Greeks* and *Romans* never drew any from life or fancy, without some capital fault. How came the *Jews*, how came the illiterate Evangelists, by such extraordinary skill ? And further, how came they to ascribe such mild, such passive virtues, to their Messiah, whom the whole nation expected to be, on the contrary, an enterprizing and prosperous warrior ? Had one of them deviated so unaccountably from the general opinion ; is it credible that they all should ? Had every one of them attempted to make a beautiful picture of that sort, without regard to the original ; would all their pictures have been alike, yet each distinguished by such peculiarities, as proved none of them to be copied from the other ? Or supposing even that, could they have persuaded an unwilling world, that these resembled this original, when plainly they did not ?

Now if their narratives be faithful descriptions of a real person, well may we ask, as the *Jews* did with another spirit, *Whence hath this man these things ; and what wisdom is this, which is given unto him* ? Is not this the carpenter's son† ?* What education had he to form him, what patterns to form himself upon, to become the man he was ? By what train of thinking could he be led to conceive, by what prospects could

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* Mark vi. 2.

† Matth. xiii. 55.

he be moved to undertake, by what power was he enabled to accomplish, the unparalleled things he did? To imagine that such a one existed by accident, is monstrously unreasonable. But that he should also have fallen by accident, just into that single country, in which there was a system of religion, that he could build on, with a series of predictions applicable to himself; and just at that period too, which these predictions had so pointed out, as to raise an universal expectation of him: that under all the disadvantages of a low condition, he should have spirits enough to make and maintain the highest of claims, sagacity enough to interpret the ancient oracles in a much sublimer and juster sense, than any of the most learned instructors of the people, and self-denial enough to prefer, in consequence of these interpretations, persecution and crucifixion, before the safety of a private station, or the splendor of offered dominion: that every one of these things (and others equally strange might be added) should meet in the same man, without the special appointment of heaven, exceeds all power of chance. Consider him only as a mere man, he appears to have been unspeakably the greatest and best of men. Consider only those consequences of his coming into the world, which even unbelievers must acknowledge, he appears to be the most important person that ever did come into it. The general reasonableness of his doctrine, the coolness of his temper, the composedness and familiarity of his whole conversation, prove he was no enthusiast: the unvaried goodness of his life, the willingness with which he suffered death, the impossibility, which his understanding could not but see, of attaining any worldly advantage by the course which he took; nay indeed, the difficulties which he left in some articles of his scheme, and needed not, if he had contrived it to serve a turn, prove full as evidently, that he was no impostor. What must he have been then? And what else can we gather from his whole behaviour, than what the spectators did from the finishing scene of it upon the cross: *Truly this was the son of God**.

But if indeed a title so transcendent belongs to Jesus, we are surely bound to learn, with the utmost docility, from the scriptures written by his direction, what it comprehends, and what is connected with it. There we read, that *in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the*

word

* Matth. xxvii. 54.

*word was God**: that by him the Father created all things, and by him hath conducted, ever since, the concerns of this world; whence he is called, in the text, *the Author and Finisher of our Faith*. He laid the ground-work of it immediately on the fall of our first parents, the consequences of which we all feel, in the gracious intimation given them, that *the seed of the woman†* shall destroy the serpent's power: and afterwards made valuable additions to it of *precious promises‡* from time to time. When idolatry and vice had overspread the rest of the world; he preserved it with peculiar care in one nation, *as a light shining in a dark place§*, for the benefit of all, who would turn their eyes towards it; and, by a chain of wonderful providences, brought on the proper season for diffusing it throughout the earth. Then he divested himself of *the glory which he had with the Father before the world was||*; *the word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us¶*; taught men in person the great truths of religion, confirmed them by beneficent miracles performed, and illustrious prophecies fulfilled; exemplified them, as I have said, in his practice; and provided the means of their descending uncorrupted to all future ages, and being efficaciously applied to the conviction of the wicked, and the comfort of the good. So fully is he, and he could not be more fully, what the apostle calls him: who next reminds us, that in carrying on this inconceivably kind work, he willingly underwent all manner of ill usage, and at length *endured the pain, and despised the shame, of the cross*, inflicted on him by wretches, for whom his precepts were too holy, and his life too harmless; that so he might demonstrate his sincerity, and set a pattern of doing the hardest things, which he taught. Nay, he submitted farther, to become the representative of transgressors; to be forsaken of God, and have his soul made sorrowful unto death, in that mysterious dispensation of laying on him the iniquities of us all: in order to give the most tremendous proof of the heinousness of sin; that such a one as he should suffer so much, to induce the just and wise, though equally merciful, Ruler of all to forgive it, and engage and enable the guilty to forsake it.

VOL. II.

I

These

* John i. 1.

† Gen. iii. 15.

‡ 2 Pet. i. 4.

§ Verse 19.

|| John xvii. 5.

¶ John i. 14.

These things he did, the text goes on to say, *for the joy that was set before him*: the joy of illustrating at once the holiness and goodness of God, who appointed and accepted this method of our salvation; the joy of reforming and making happy, in themselves and one another, in time and to eternity, all those multitudes, who in every generation should embrace his offers; and lastly, the joy of being deservedly honoured, as the blessed instrument of these inestimable benefits.

Accordingly he hath the honour, as the apostle proceeds to observe, of sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God: being placed, in respect of that nature which he condescended to assume, and the sufferings of which are thus properly rewarded, in a state of supreme felicity, at the head of the whole creation, *angels and authorities being made subject unto him**. And in this exalted station he shall remain, superintending the affairs of the universe, till he returns to our earth at the day of judgement. Then *every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him†*, they which blaspheme him, and they which professing, yet obey not his gospel; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe‡.

This then is he, to whom we are directed to look: to look off, for so the word signifies, from other objects, unsafe or unworthy, and contemplate him: nor only as the most excellent of men, but being raised *far above every name that is named either in this world, or that which is to come§*; nor only as thus eminent in himself, but as our greatest benefactor and truest friend; our wise lawgiver and spotless example; the sacrifice by whose blood we are washed from our sins; the head of the body, of which we are members; the judge, on whose sentence our everlasting state depends: our prophet, our priest and our king; our Saviour, *our Lord and our God¶*.

Surely of such a one it seems impossible to think lowly: and almost unavoidable to think often and much. Yet were we to examine ourselves, how frequently or how seldom we recollect his perfections, and our most interesting relations

to

* 1 Pet. iii. 22.

† Rev. i. 7.

‡ 2 Thess. i. 8, 9, 10.

§ Eph. i. 21.

¶ John xx. 28.

to him; whether we are strongly or slightly affected by them; whether we principally attend to his rules of life, or those which are suggested by inconsiderate custom, vicious inclination, or vain self-opinion, falsely called reason; whether, even if we mean to do well, we pray with humility for his grace, or trust our own imagined strength; and lastly, whether after *doing all* we can, we rely on his merits, as *unprofitable servants**, or hope for salvation by our own sinful good deeds; what answer must the consciences of many of us make? Such undoubtedly as will at least evidence the need of fixing our thoughts upon him much more steadily, than we have done; of stirring up in our hearts the warmest sentiments of reverence, gratitude and love towards him; (for who can be equally intitled to them, or what employment so delightful or beneficial?) and of exerting them in every act, which he hath appointed, or his followers found serviceable. External acts of themselves indeed are nothing: but when they proceed from a good principle within, and are chosen and used with discretion, and keep up the vigour of the mind, and strengthen good habits inexpressibly. The importance of them in civil affairs is every where acknowledged: and how can we fancy it to be less in religious? Therefore if indeed we honour our Redeemer, we must shew that we honour his sacraments, his ordinances, the weekly, the yearly days consecrated to him, the places of his worship: permit me to add, his ministers, only being careful to distinguish, for the sake of our master and of mankind, the devout, the laborious, the disinterested, from the lovers of pleasure or gain, of power or applause, from the formal, the thoughtless, the lukewarm.

Nor will he, whose respect to *the author and finisher of our faith* is real, either seek or wish to shelter himself from infidel scorn by leaving the motives of his conduct in religious matters doubtful: but openly, though decently, make it known to all men, of which side he in truth is; and do at least as much for the cause of God, as he could with propriety for any other, that he hath at heart: recollecting that thus the pious will be animated, the opposers staggered, the indolent awakened; and likewise, that them only *who confess him before men, will Jesus confess before his Father which is in heaven*†.

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But

* Luke xv. 8. 10.

† Matth. x. 32.

But zeal for his mission and doctrines will be of no avail, without imitation of his example and obedience to his laws. As on the one hand, the virtue which men profess without religion, the religion which they profess without christianity, the christianity which they profess without affection to Christ, is essentially imperfect, and mostly nominal; they model it into what they please, and it wastes away to nothing: so on the other, not only hypocritical, but partial, attachment to him, fondness for him as the obtainer of pardon and future happiness, and slight of him as the director of life; hoping to be saved by faith without works, or waiting for his grace to amend us without taking pains to amend ourselves; these things put his gospel and him to open shame*. We must look unto Jesus, as our exemplar and legislator: else we shall look to him in vain as our Saviour.

Some of his actions indeed were appropriated to his office; and some of his precepts, to that of his apostles. But whatever was temporary or singular in either, is easily discerned, and the rest binds us all. Therefore we must learn of him to be meek and lowly: for so shall we find rest for our souls†. We must condescend, when occasion requires, to the meanest instances of mutual service: for our Master and Lord washed his disciples feet, that they should do as he had done to them‡. We must take the most injurious provocations patiently: for he, when he was reviled, reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously§. We must forgive one another, as God for Christ's sake is ready to forgive us||. We must speak the truth every man with his neighbour¶, for there was no guile found in his mouth**. We must be harmless and undefiled, separate from sinners††, in our temper and practice, even when obliged to be most in their company; for so was he, conversing with them, as a physician with the sick. In a word, the same mind must be in us, which was in Christ Jesus‡‡ our Lord.

And we must not only avoid gross transgressions and omissions; but purify ourselves as he is pure§§, and perfect holiness in

* Heb. vi. 6.

† Matth. xi. 29.

‡ John xiii. 5, 13, 15.

§ 1 Pet. ii. 23.

|| Eph. iv. 32.

¶ Eph. iv. 25.

** 1 Pet. ii. 22.

†† Heb. vii. 26.

‡‡ Phil. ii. 5. §§ 1 John iii. 3.

*in the fear of God**. Ambition, worldliness, delicacy, voluptuousness, dissipation, eagerness for amusements and trifles, are utterly beneath us, and unsuitable to our profession. A christian is a character of dignity: and though he submits with a graceful willingness to whatever his condition here demands; yet he *sets his affection only on the things above*†; and from the view of his Redeemer placed there at the right hand of God, draws his directions for his conduct below: reasoning with St. Paul, *the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and he died for all, that they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again*‡.

Such as are duly moved by this consideration will faithfully perform, not only the general duties of life, but the particular ones of their rank and circumstances. Persons in authority will reflect, that he who is *Lord of Lords*§, and *the prince of the kings of the earth*||, hath deputed them for a work, similar to his own final one, *the punishment of evil-doers, and the praise of them that do well*¶; and consequently will inform themselves concerning both. *He needed not, when upon earth, that any should testify of man; for he knew what was in man***.

But sagacious inquiry and strict observation are necessary for their executing that noble plan, which David hath laid down for them in the 101st Psalm. Happy the nation, where it is pursued with gentleness and candor, yet with spirit and efficacy, that the ill-inclined *may hear and fear and do no more presumptuously*††.

Again: the ministers of the gospel, if they look unto and *love the Lord Jesus in sincerity*‡‡, will imitate his assiduity in giving instruction, his compassion to penitents, his plain denunciations against obstinate sinners, his contempt of unjust reproach, yet his caution to guard against needless offence: will accommodate their discourses as he did, to the wants, the dispositions, the capacities of their hearers; *condescending in this and all things to men of low estate*§§: will remember that *his kingdom is not of this world*¶¶, and use whatever advantages they enjoy in it, to the purposes of the next: be in every

* 2 Cor. vii. 1.

† Col. iii. 2.

‡ 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

§ Rev. xxii. 14.

|| Rev. i. 5.

¶ 1 Pet. ii. 14.

** John ii. 25.

†† Deut. xvii. 13.

‡‡ Eph. vi. 24.

§§ Rom. xxii. 16.

¶¶ John xviii. 36.

every good sense, as he was, but in no bad one, *the friends of publicans and sinners**; neither act as being lords over God's heritage, but ensamples to the flock, that when the chief shepherd shall appear, they may receive a crown of glory†. Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the apostle and high priest of our profession‡. Further yet: those who have large incomes, if they fix their thoughts on him, who for our sakes became poor, that we, through his poverty, might become rich§ in good works|| and heavenly treasures, will be powerfully excited not to place their happiness either in the acquisition or possession of wealth, or the enjoyment of any of those pleasures which wealth can help to procure: but in doing good, as the blessed Jesus did, and benefiting their brethren for whom he died¶. To do this more effectually, they will set an example of prudent self-restraint and frugality, which may preserve multitudes of others, if not themselves, from follies and distresses: they will employ what is thus saved in acts of judicious charity; and have constantly in their minds what many, who are extremely liberal, strangely forget, that all expences, and seeming bounties, which tend to corrupt morals, are mischievous; and using methods to make men pious and virtuous, providing for their souls at the same time with their bodies, which our Saviour did continually, conduces beyond all things even to their present welfare.

Lastly, they who are afflicted, (and who is not often so in one respect or another?) if they dwell, as the text was meant to advise them particularly, on the contemplation of our compassionate high-priest, *the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief***, will learn from him to endure *all the contradiction of sinners*, and *all the heavy yoke* that is laid on the sons of Adam††, disesteem, ingratitude, perverseness, insolence, disappointment, poverty, pain and death, without being weary or faint in their minds ‡‡. He, though faultless, endured much more than we sinners shall be called to: under every trial *his grace will be sufficient for us§§*: if we suffer with him we shall also reign with him ¶¶; the more we undergo, the greater will be our reward: and what have we then to re-

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* Matth. xi. 19.

§ 2 Cor. viii. 9.

* IC. liii. 3.

§§ 2 Cor. vii. 9.

† 1 Pet. v. 3, 4.

|| 1 Tim. vi. 18.

†† Eccles. xi. 1.

¶¶ 1 Tim. ii. 12.

‡ Heb. iii. 1.

¶ Rom. xiv. 10, 15.

‡‡ Heb. xii. 3.

sent or fear, or be dejected about, or whom to envy? Miserable comforts are all the worldly means, by which men labour in vain to deceive themselves, and mitigate their wretchedness, compared with the *everlasting consolation and good hope, which our Lord Jesus Christ hath given us**, whose words are, *to him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne; even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne†*.

Let every one therefore of every degree *fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life, whereunto he is called‡*: for these are *not cunningly devised fables§* but *the true sayings of God||*. They who have hitherto lived in sin, (and so far we all have, that *by his obedience to the law no man is justified in the sight of God¶*) let them *flee to the merciful Jesus from the wrath to come***, *acquaint themselves with him, and be at peace††*. They that once had a sense of religion, but *have left their first love‡‡*, drawn away by vicious indulgences, or temporal interests, or *the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge§§*, let them remember from whence they are fallen and repent, and *do their first works|||*. They, who have hitherto persevered in piety, let them form in themselves, as they will always have room and need, a still completer image of Christ. And let us all incessantly study to acquire that constant, that affectionate and influencing attention to him, for which St. Peter celebrates the early christians, when he saith, *whom having not seen, ye love; in whom though now ye see him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls¶¶*

* 2 Theff. ii. 16.

§ 2 Pet. i. 16.

** Matth. iii. 7.

§§ Prov. xix. 27.

† Rev. iii. 21.

|| Rev. xix. 9.

†† Job. xxii. 21.

| Rev. ii. 5.

‡ 1 Tim. vi. 12.

¶ Gal. ii. 16. iii. 17.

‡‡ Rev. ii. 4.

¶¶ Pet. i. 8, 9.

S E R M O N XLIX.

THE GENUINE DOCTRINE OF THE GOSPEL, AND THE CAUSES
OF THE OPPOSITION OF JEWS AND GENTILES TO IT.

I COR. i. 22, 23, 24.

*For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom ;
But we preach Christ crucified ; unto the Jews a stumbling
block, and unto the Greeks foolishness ;
But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the
power of God, and the wisdom of God.*

TO expect eternal life through a Saviour who died for us, is the fundamental doctrine of the Christian profession : the article, that distinguishes our faith from all others, and with which our religion stands or falls. The New Testament therefore dwells much on the importance of this belief : and especially the epistles of St. Paul inculcate it every where. He *determined*, though a man of extensive knowledge, *not to know any thing among those whom he instructed, to insist on no subject, comparatively speaking, save Christ Jesus, and him crucified**. Still both he, and the rest of the apostles, must plainly foresee, and they quickly experienced, as the preachers of the gospel have done ever since, that the prejudices of many, and the pride of all men, would find much difficulty in submitting to owe their salvation to another ; especially to one, who had lived so poor a life, and suffered so disgraceful a death ; which would all be avoided by teaching them to ascribe the whole merit of it to themselves. But *they had not so learned Christ†*, as to *handle the Word of God deceitfully‡*. They knew, that what seemed to human vanity weak and ill-judged, was the true and only way to heavenly happiness. And therefore, though *the Jews required a sign, &c.*

In

* 1 Cor. ii. 2.

† Eph. iv. 20.

‡ 2 Cor. iv. 2.

In discoursing on these words, I shall endeavour to shew,

I. What it is to *preach Christ crucified*.

II. Whence it came to pass, that this was *to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness*.

III. That, notwithstanding, it places in a strong light both *the power and the wisdom of God*.

I. What it is to *preach Christ crucified*. Now this, in one word, is to lay before men the nature and terms of that *eternal salvation*, of which, by his suffering on the cross, he is *become the author unto all that obey him**. More particularly it is to instruct them in the following great truths: that there ever hath, doth, and will exist, one infinite being, perfectly wise, just and good, the Almighty maker and ruler of the universe; who created man for the practice of piety and virtue, and for the enjoyment of everlasting life: that our first parents, by wilfully transgressing a most equitable command of his, forfeited their title to immortality, disordered the frame of their bodies and minds, and derived to us the same corrupt and mortal nature, to which they had reduced themselves: that being in this condition through their fault, all men sunk into a still worse, by committing many sins, which, however prone to them, they might have had the means of avoiding; and thus have deserved punishment here and hereafter: that wickedness prevailing early, and spreading wide in the world, first the practice, then the knowledge, both of true religion and moral virtue, were in a great measure lost out of it: but that the unspeakable mercy and wisdom of the Supreme Being provided a remedy for these evils, intimated in general terms to the earliest offenders, promised more distinctly in the succeeding ages, and actually given *when the proper fulness of time came†*; which remedy was this. A person, made known under the character of the only-begotten Son of God, and one with the Father in a manner to us incomprehensible, after teaching mankind from the beginning by various other methods, took upon him our nature, was born of a virgin, and dwelt on earth, to teach us personally by his word and example: condescended, for this compassionate purpose, to all the inconveniences of the present state of things, to numberless indignities and sufferings, and lastly, to have his life taken away by the hands of wicked men; *humbling himself unto death,*

VOL. II.

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even

* Heb. v. 9.

† Gal. iv. 4.

*even the death of the cross**, usually inflicted on none but the vilest and lowest of malefactors. In consideration of this meritorious goodness of his, which he engaged, before the world began thus to manifest, the Most High established with him a covenant of grace and favour, by which *all power in heaven and earth was given him†*; and provision was made, that whoever should sincerely repent of the sins which he had committed, and throw himself on the promised mercy of God; whether as more obscurely notified before the Redeemer's incarnation, or more clearly afterwards; taking the word of truth for the law of his life, and faithfully endeavouring to obey it, should not only have pardon for his past transgressions, however heinous, but the assistance of the divine spirit to preserve him from future ones: that a kind providence should turn every thing to his good, which befell him in this world, and endless felicity be his portion in the next. But then it was also denounced, that whoever should either slight these offers when duly made; or, professing to accept them, live unsuitably to them, Christ should be of no benefit to such; they should remain in their sins, with this heavy aggravation of their guilt, that they had rejected the counsel of God for their salvation; and when *light was come into the world, loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil‡*.

This is, in brief, the doctrine of Christ crucified. The main parts of it, you see, are two: God's goodness to us, and our duty to him: and if either be omitted, men are not *taught as the truth is in Jesus§*. Insisting on moral duties only, is overlooking the greatest of all duties, piety. Insisting on the duties of natural religion only, is injuriously despising those of revelation, which the same authority hath enjoined. And laying before men all the commandments of God, only omitting to say, how they shall be enabled to perform them, and how they shall procure their performances, faulty as the best of them are, to be accepted, is failing them in points of the most absolute necessity.

But then, on the other hand, speaking of nothing, but Christ and his grace, is concealing what *the grace of God appeared unto all men to teach them; that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously and godly in this*

* Phil. ii. 8.

† Matth. xxviii. 18.

‡ John. iii. 19.

§ Eph. iv. 21.

*this present world**. It is not therefore naming Christ ever so often, or exalting his compassion to the fallen race of *Adam* ever so much, or describing his dreadful sufferings ever so movingly, that is, preaching him as we ought, if all be not directed to make us become like him. His own sermon on the mount is almost entirely filled with precepts of duty; of the common duties of common life. And so may other sermons too, yet be truly christian, even without mentioning Christ expressly, provided the necessity of his aid and his merits be understood throughout them; and the great design of his coming, the reformation of the hearts and lives of men, be closely pursued in them. Thus then judge of our discourses: and, which is of more importance, thus judge of your own improvement. It is neither talking nor thinking highly of Christ, nor being affected in the tenderest manner with his bitter passion and dying love, that constitutes a believer in him, such as he will finally own: but *herein may we have boldness in the day of judgement, if, as he was, so are we in this world*†.

Yet still the sacrifice of him *as a lamb without blemish*‡, for our sins, the need we had of it, and the benefits we receive from it, are such capital and indispensable articles, that every preacher, who doth not frequently return to them, is without excuse: and every professor of christianity, who doth not *live by the faith of the son of God, who loved him, and gave himself for him, frustrates his grace*§, and will *come short of his glory*||. Accordingly, though St. Paul himself hath considerable parts of chapters, in which little, if any thing, is said of our Saviour: yet all prepares the way for introducing him again; all points our eye to him; all makes parts of that building, *the corner stone of which is Jesus Christ*¶.

Having thus explained, what *preaching Christ crucified* is, I proceed to shew,

II. Why this doctrine was *to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness*; which the words of the text, when unfolded, will tell us plainly. *The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom.*

The former had been delivered from the bondage of *Egypt by signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and a stretched out arm***.

	K 2	accompanied
* Tit. ii. 11, 12.	† 1 John iv. 17.	‡ 1 Pet. ii. 19.
§ Gal. ii. 20, 21.	Rom. iii. 23.	¶ Eph. ii. 20.
** Duet. iv. 34. v. 15.		

accompanied the promulgation of their law: his visible presence had dwelt with them, first in the tabernacle, then in the temple: his miraculous interpositions had given, preserved, and restored to them the land of *Canaan*, with much earthly prosperity. These blessings had so powerfully struck the imaginations of a gross and carnal people, that they paid in general but little attention to any that were not of a temporal nature. And therefore, whenever their prophets foretold the coming of the promised Redeemer, they were obliged, unless they would have their predictions despised and forgotten, to describe him in terms, literally denoting worldly grandeur: *as ruling in the midst of his enemies, judging among the heathen**, and *higher than the kings of the earth†*. They did however join to these descriptions such circumstances, as sufficiently determined their words to a spiritual meaning. But still the other, being far more agreeable, was always uppermost in the thoughts of the *Jews*; and they would image to themselves the expected son of *David*, as a mighty conqueror, who should prove himself the true Messiah by supernatural assistances from above, enabling him to exert a more than human force against the nations, which held them in subjection, and extend the *Jewish* empire over the globe.

In this sense it was, that they *required a sign‡*. Other signs of his mission our Saviour had shewn without number: but still they demand to *see a sign from heaven§*. Every miracle is a sign from heaven, had they considered rightly. But the sign, on which their hearts were set, was that in the book of *Daniel*; when the *Son of man* should come with the clouds of heaven, and be brought near to the Ancient of Days; and have given to him dominion and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations and languages should serve him||. Our Saviour observed their mistake, and told them, that the sign, which they desired, should indeed be given, but *not to that generation*; that the principal evidence, to be afforded them, was *the sign of the prophet Jonas¶*: the resurrection of *Jesus* the third day from the

* Ps. cx. 2, 6.

† Ps. lxxxix. 27.

‡ And a sign of this sort they expected, even when the temple was burnt by the *Romans*. For that very day a false prophet assured the people, *ὅτι ὁ Θεὸς ἐπὶ τὸ μέγαν ἀναβηταὶ κελύσει, διὲλαιας τὰ σημεῖα τῆς σωτηρίας*. Joseph. B. I. l. 6. c. 5. § 2. Ed. Haverc. In a few lines after, he styles this, *προσμένειν τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ βοήθειαν*.

§ Matth. xvi. 1. Mark viii. 11. Luke xi. 16.

|| Dan. vii. 13, 14.

¶ Matth. xii. 39.

the grave, as *Jonas* rose from the depth of the sea. To following ages farther signs were to be vouchsafed in their order: the dominion, which they expected to see established at once, was designed to take place by degrees, over the souls and consciences of men, not their bodies and fortunes merely: and in this noblest sense, *the kingdoms of this world were to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ**. But at length the time will come for a yet more awful display of his regal power, in the last judgement: and then shall they who were so prematurely impatient for a sign from heaven, see, before they wish it, *the sign of the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory†*.

But such representations were likely to have little effect on such minds. One, who should *at that time restore again the kingdom to Israel‡*, was what the whole people wanted. And when they not only beheld the meanness of our Saviour's appearance, and heard the meekness of his doctrine, but saw how carefully he avoided the opportunities of obtaining an earthly kingdom, the leading part of the nation immediately denied him. But when he was arraigned and condemned, and suffered the death of a slave; then the faith, even of his apostles, almost died with him. *We trusted*, say two of his disciples, as if now all hope was at an end, *we trusted, that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel§*. It is true, they recovered themselves: but the greater part of the *Jews* did not: and a crucified Redeemer continues *a stumbling-block* to them; or, in the words of *Simeon*, *a sign spoken against, set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel||*: indeed for the utter fall of that church and nation, till the season foretold shall come, for which providence hath left room, by the wonderful preservation of this one and only people distinct from all others for so many ages, when by *looking on him whom they have pierced, and mourning*, they shall¶ rise again and be as *life from the dead***.

As for the *Greeks*, or *Gentiles*, they did not object to the gospel, that the authority of it wanted the proof of signs from heaven; but that the preaching of it wanted the recommendation of what they called *wisdom*. Neither the manner of the apostles teaching was adorned with that plausible oratory, of which

* Rev. xi. 15.

† Matth. xiv. 30.

‡ Acts. i. 6.

§ Luke xxiv. 21.

|| Luke ii. 34.

¶ Zech. xii. 10. John xix. 37.

** Rom. xi. 15.

which they were so fond ; which soothed the ears, and entertained the imagination ; which could make a bad cause victorious, and a good one suspected : nor yet was the matter of their discourse made up of curious speculations, abstruse points in philosophy debated with accuteness, theories, built upon slender foundations to great heights, then attacked with subtle objections, and defended with more subtle refinements. These were the delights of the learned *Greeks* ; who, as *St. Paul*, and indeed their own writers observe particularly of the *Athenians*, *spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing**. Immediately therefore, when he had begun to preach in that city, they apply to him with great eagerness : *may we know, what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is†?* But when they found no such gratification of their fancy as they expected ; but a grave reproof of their favourite superstitions, a serious call to repentance, a solemn denunciation of a future recompence ; and the foundation of these disagreeable doctrines laid in a mere fact, which was contrary to all their schemes and systems, that *God would judge the world in righteousness by that man, whom he had ordained, whereof he had given assurance to all men, in that he had raised him from the dead ; some, we read, mocked ; and of those, who said more civilly, that they would hear him again of that matter‡*, we have no cause to believe, that many did. Nor would the principal *Romans* afford to our holy faith more attention. For when *St. Paul* was arguing before *Agrippa*, being a Jew, from the prophets that *Christ was to suffer and rise again ; Festus* the governor, instantly interrupted him : *Paul, thou art beside thyself ; much learning doth make thee mad§*.

This was the treatment, which man, *wise in their own conceits*||, and bigotted to their own opinions, gave the gospel of Christ. Its doctrines had nothing amusing to minds full of trifling curiosity ; its precepts had many things disgusting to human sensuality and pride : its proofs were inconsistent with their prevailing notions. So it was rejected without examination by persons, whom the irony of *Job* suits perfectly well : *no doubt, but ye are the people ; and wisdom shall die with you¶*. It ought to surprise no one, that this sort of men, who have

always

* Acts xvii.

† Verse 19.

‡ Acts xvii. 31, 32.

§ Acts xxvi. 23, 24. | Rom. xii. 16.

¶ Job xii. 2.

always been too common in the world, and never more than now, should scorn christianity: while they continue such as they are, they cannot embrace it.

But, God be thanked, there have ever been some of more equitable dispositions: and to these it hath constantly appeared in that light, which the text expresses.

III. *But unto them, which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* They who would suffer the voice of reason and revelation to call upon them, and would attend to the call, quickly discovered, under the meanness of Christ's appearance, divine power; and under the plainness of his doctrine, divine wisdom.

The *Jews* had no cause to expect military exploits, miraculous victories, and outward splendor in their Messiah. Their own prophets had foretold, that he was to *come to them lowly and meek**; *to be despised and rejected of men, to pour out his soul unto death an offering for sin, and make intercession for the transgressors†*. Of other sorts of miracles they had many more performed by him and his disciples, than by *Moses* and the prophets. If his death, for want of knowing the scriptures, appeared an objection; his rising again, and ascension into heaven, was a full proof of his authority. If he brought them no deliverance from their temporal enemies; yet he freed them from infinitely more formidable ones, from sin and guilt, and the wrath of God; and instead of a short-lived tyranny over the nations of the earth, he obtained for them an eternal triumph over death and hell; and *made them kings and priests unto God, to reign with him for ever and ever‡*. Thus was he in much the most important sense, *the power of God unto salvation§*: and his real greatness exceeded all that they looked for, unspeakably more, than his visible appearance fell beneath it.

As to the defect of that wisdom, which the *Greeks* required in the gospel: it had not indeed *the wisdom of this world*, or of the vain *disputers of this world||*, who *professing themselves to be wise became fools¶*: but, void as it appears of argumentation and ornament, every single truth, that can lead men to virtue and happiness, is taught in it much more fully and convincingly, than in all the preceeding institutions either of philosophy or religion. The being, attributes and providence

of

* Zech. ix. 9. Matth. xxi. 5. † 1st. liii. ‡ Rev. i. 6. v. 10. xx. 6. xxii. 5.

§ Rom. i. 16.

| Cor. i. 20.

¶ Rom. i. 22.

of God, the apostles proved, were *clearly seen, being understood by the things that were made**: the nature and obligation of piety and morals, the forgiveness of sins upon repentance, the inward assistance of divine grace, the future happiness of the good, and punishment of the bad, these things they did not ingeniously harangue upon, after the beloved manner of the *Greeks*, and leave them in the same uncertainty in which they found them, but gave for their assertions concerning them, the irrefragable testimony of miracles which must proceed from the Almighty; and some of them such as, in their opinion, even the Almighty was unable to perform. For that *God himself should raise the dead, was thought a thing incredible with them†*. But as no just reasoning can shew it to be impossible, it is more certainly his work for being beyond our comprehension. And this is that undeniable *demonstration of the spirit and of power* which infinitely excels *all the enticing words of man's wisdom‡*, not only in the strength of its evidence, but the efficacy of its influence too. For after the deepest philosophers, and most florid orators had wearied themselves for ages in framing elaborate discourses about religion and virtue, without being able to set up the true profession of either, so much as in a single village; the unlearned disciples of Christ laid, in a few years, such foundations of both throughout the world, as have supported them to this day, and ever will. *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men§*.

Since therefore the whole of the gospel is so firmly proved, and most parts of it so evidently rational, and no part of it evidently otherwise: be we ever so incapable of penetrating into the depths of some doctrines, and the reasons of some proceedings, yet well may it become us to think, that he who sees all things, may easily see many, which we do not; and to reverence *the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom which he ordained before the world, unto our glory||*. Whether sinners could be saved no other way, than by the death of his son: or why, if they could, he hath preferred that to the rest; we have no right to ask. What he hath chosen, we might be sure is best, even did no reason at all for it appear. But he hath made known several to us: some

clearly

* Rom. i. 20.

† Acts xxxvi. 8.

‡ 1 Cor. ii. 4.

§ 1 Cor. i, 25.

|| 1 Cor. ii, 7.

clearly, some *as through a glass darkly**; but the obscurest of them all to be contemplated with awful respect.

By his eternal Son, God made the world, and hath administered it from the beginning. He therefore was plainly the fit person to conduct the most important of all its affairs, the recovery of mankind from sin and misery; *that in all things, as the apostle expresses it, he might have the pre-eminence, and in him all fulness dwell*†. In order to recover and reform men, he must instruct them: and doing it himself was unquestionably the most efficacious method. But how must he come to do it? Had he appeared in a station of power and wealth; many would have been ready to pay court to him: but few, to obey his precepts from the heart. Even in his low estate, some followed him a while, merely for the loaves. And how much more hypocrisy, a very improper qualification for the kingdom of righteousness, would there have been amongst his hearers, had the circumstances of the teacher been more inviting! And how unfurmountable a disgrace might they have brought upon his whole undertaking in its very infancy, instead of the honour and support which it received from the unimpeached integrity of its first afflicted professors!

But further: Nothing enforces precepts, like example. Now what example could the Messiah have set, in the midst of worldly pomp and grandeur? A very useful one certainly in some points to some of his chief officers, and others about his person; but removed from the sight, and unsuitable to the condition of the bulk of mankind: whereas in the sort of life, which he chose, an extremely public, though a mean one, he was a daily and familiar pattern to all men, of the most general and difficult virtues: of condescension, disinterestedness, and delight to do good; of indifference to worldly enjoyments, composedness under contempt, meekness under malicious provocations, and resignation to God's will under the bitterest sufferings of every kind. These things, most of us, in one part or another of our pilgrimage, have need to practise: and we find them so hard to learn, that the encouragement of his having done and borne much more than he requires of us, and the assurance, that *having been tempted himself, he will succour us when we are tempted*‡, will, in a time of trial, be blessings unspeakable.

VOL. II.

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Then

* 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

† See Col. i. 13—20.

‡ Heb. ii. 18.

Then consider, besides, how great a confirmation his humility and patience add to the other proofs of his authority. A claim to worldly power, by virtue of a divine commission, raises apprehensions of unfair design. But when a person, declaring himself to come from heaven, renounces every thing on earth, which men usually hold dear; when he shews by plain facts, that his errand is, *not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to lay down his life for his followers**; when he foresees and foretells, that his doctrine will bring him to the shamefullest and cruellest of deaths, and yet goes on, and meets it calmly: here is the strongest evidence of sincerity; and the most engaging motive to love him who hath so loved us, as to seal with his blood the truth of the good tidings, which he came to bring us.

But there is yet one reason more of our Saviour's passion, of which if we see not distinctly the full force, we see however, that it may be of infinite force. Mankind are sinners. Our first parents were so: we have all been so, few of us think to what a degree: and close upon sin follow weakness and guilt. The good instructions and example of our blessed Lord have indeed, without any thing farther, a powerful tendency to reform us, if we have strength to reform ourselves, on seeing that we ought. But what can they do for us, if we have not; which experience too often proves to be our case? or supposing them to do it ever so effectually, still it would be true, that we have been sinners; have dishonoured our Maker, and broken his laws: and who but himself can tell, what satisfaction the holiness of his nature and the honour of his government may demand to be made for such offences? mere sorrow for having done amiss very seldom frees us in this world from the ill consequences of transgression: and what security can we have, that it will in the next? living well for the future, is making no amends for having sinned before: for it is no more than our duty, if we had never sinned at all: besides that what men call living well, especially men destitute of the spirit of Christ, is mixed with innumerable and grievous faults. In this state of things then, where is the certainty, that our sins would or could be forgiven; or the authority of God kept up in the eyes of his creation otherwise, than by punishing the guilty; and if that was to be done, the whole race of
mankind

* Matth. xx. 28.

mankind must fall under the sentence. Here it was therefore that his unfearchable wisdom interposed, who, alone knowing the fittest means of reconciling justice with goodness, pitched upon this : that as a terrifying monument of the ill desert of iniquity, his beloved Son should in our nature, and in our stead suffer death ; and for an eternal demonstration of the divine benignity, his undergoing it voluntarily should be rewarded with the highest glory to himself ; and with pardon, and grace, and life eternal to all who made their humble claim to them, by repentance, faith, and love. Thus did God shew himself *just, and the justifier of them which believe in Jesus**: thus did *mercy and truth meet together ; righteousness and peace kiss each other†*.

Assuredly so extraordinary a method would never have been taken without extraordinary need of it. That we should fully discern the need, is no way necessary : it suffices that God did. Our concern is no more than to accept salvation, his own gift, on his own terms : renouncing all merit in our lives, laying hold, by a lively faith, on the merits of our Redeemer's obedience, thanking our heavenly Father from the bottom of our souls, for sending his blessed Son into the world, and esteeming most highly the christian creed, the christian worship, the christian sacrament. *God forbid, then, that we should glory in any thing, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ‡*: or ever be ashamed of that, for all the scorn and ridicule of a thoughtless and profane world. But God forbid also, that while we profess to believe on him, we should *crucify him to ourselves afresh, and put him and his religion to shame§*, by transgressing and neglecting any obligation of piety towards our Maker, our Saviour, our Sanctifier ; of justice or goodness towards our fellow-creatures ; of humility, sobriety, temperance, chastity, in the government of ourselves. For in vain do we *call him Lord*, unless we *do the things||* which he commands us : in vain do we trust in his sacrifice, unless we *present our souls and bodies, a sacrifice acceptable unto God¶* : in vain do we imagine our peace is made through him in heaven, unless on earth we *follow peace with all men, and that universal holiness of life without which no man shall see the Lord***.

* Rom. iii. 26.

† Psal. lxxxv. 10.

‡ Gal. vi. 41.

§ Heb. vi. 6.

|| Luke vi. 46.

¶ Rom. xii. 1.

** Heb. xii. 14.

S E R M O N L.

FAITH IN A FUTURE STATE, THE CHIEF CONSOLATION UNDER AFFLICTION.

I COR. XV. 19.

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

IN the words preceeding these, the apostle, after setting forth, in several particulars, the evidence of our blessed Lord's resurrection, goes on to prove from it the important doctrine of a general resurrection to eternal life.

It may seem to us now very strange, that any, who called themselves christians, could make the least doubt of so known and essential an article of the christian faith. But if we consider the state, in which the world was then, we shall wonder no longer, that, of professed believers, there should be some, who did not believe the dead would be raised again. Among the *Jews*, the Pharisees indeed were firmly persuaded of this truth. But the Sadducees; a considerable sect, though not for the numbers, yet for the rank of those who embraced it, rejected the doctrine of a future life intirely: and looked on the resurrection, as a thing peculiarly incredible. Notwithstanding which, as they held a present providence that rules the world, they might many of them, reading the predictions of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah, seeing the accomplishment of them in the person of *Jesus*, and struck with the miracles, which he and his followers performed, be persuaded, on the whole, that he was sent from God; and yet be very backward to understand what he taught, when he contradicted their former prejudices. But the heathens were still more likely to act thus. For amongst them, even the steadiest believers of a future state all disbelieved the rising again of the body, as a thing

a thing both impossible and unfit: for their men of learning thought it only the prison of the soul; which must always be an impediment, instead of a help to it. Suppose then christianity preached, with proper evidence, to such persons as these: they would receive very gladly what was said of the remission of sins, the obligations to virtue, the future life of the soul, happy or miserable, according to every one's deeds. But when the resurrection of the body was taught, there must evidently be great danger, either that they would reject the whole of the gospel, because of this one seemingly incredible part; as the philosophers at *Athens* did, who are mentioned in the *Acts*; or else, that they would so interpret this part, as to reconcile it with their preconceived opinion. Accordingly, the history of the church informs us, that several, in the first ages, thought our Saviour died and rose again, not in reality, but in miraculous appearance only. And others had equally wild fancies in other articles of religion: as indeed it was very natural for them to entertain surprising imaginations, about matters so intirely new to them; especially when, in all likelihood, great numbers were converted to the belief of christianity in general, by seeing or being informed of the miracles wrought in its favour; who perhaps had no opportunity, for some time, of hearing the particular doctrines of it explained so distinctly, by those who thoroughly understood them, as to be set right in every point. And this may possibly have been one chief reason of the many strange notions, that we find some of the early christians embraced.

Besides, they might the more easily be mistaken, in the case before us, on this account: that the apostles, imitating the language, already in use concerning the *Jewish* profelytes, expressed the change, which christianity made in the tempers and condition of men, by the phrases of *dying to sin, being buried with Christ in baptism, and rising again to newness of life*. The ignorant or prejudiced might hastily conclude from hence, that no other rising again was intended to be taught: and that therefore *the resurrection was past already*, as we are told by our apostle, some affirmed*.

Now this error, if it comprehended the denial of a future state, subverted the main purpose of christianity: which was, influencing the world to piety and virtue, from the expectation
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of that flat*. And where only the future life of the body was denied; even that, by consequence, made the gospel of *no effect*. For if the resurrection of it was a thing impossible, which all, who rejected it, seem to have held; then the resurrection of Christ was a thing impossible. Yet this was the main fact, to which the apostles were appointed to bear witness, and lay the stress of their cause upon it. If therefore they erred here, they deserved belief in nothing: their *preaching was vain, and the faith* of their followers *vain also*†. Or, supposing christianity had still sufficient evidence left; yet in another sense, it would be *vain*, that is, ineffectual to the forgiveness of our sins; the very foundation of which is, that *he who was delivered for our offences, rose again for our justification*‡. If therefore he is not risen, we are not justified: it appears not, that his death was more than that of a common man; he continues under the power of it, not able to help himself, much less others; and human kind remains, as it was before, liable to future punishment, and uncertain of future reward. This is the apostle's reasoning, just before the text; *If the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins*§. He goes on: *then they also, which are fallen asleep in Christ, are perished*||. Neither dying in the christian faith, nor dying for it, can do them good with respect to a future life. And *if in this life only we have hope in Christ*, as very probably some of the Sadducee converts might think, *we are of all men most miserable*: or, as the original word strictly signifies, *most pitiable*.

Now, of what persons this is said, and on what account it is true of them, a great doubt hath been raised.

Some have gone so far, as to affirm, that, in the present world, brutes are happier than men, and bad men than good. But of the former of these points, at least, plainly, the apostle saith nothing. Others understand him to mean, that the condition of moral heathens in this life is better than that of christians, because of the difficult duties, and severe restraints, which are peculiar to the latter. But evidently he doth not say at all,

* Origen, Com. in Matth. xxii. 23. tom. 17. p. 811. insists, that the apostle writes here against persons disbelieving a future life; and that his arguments are not conclusive against those who disbelieve a resurrection only. I have endeavoured to shew the contrary in what follows,

† Cor. xvi. 14. ‡ Rom. iv. 25. § 1 Cor. xv. 16, 17. || Verse 18.

all, what the condition of any persons actually is : but only what it would be, if they had not the hope of hereafter to support them. And therefore, with that hope, good men, and good christians, may, even at present, be happier than others ; though it were true, that, without it, they would be more miserable. Not that he meant to affirm, that they would be more miserable were the prospect of a better state out of the question. Far from it.

Read but the description, which he gives of the vicious part of the heathen world, in the beginning of his epistle to the *Romans* ; where he tells us, *God had given them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things, which are not convenient ; being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness maliciousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity ; without understanding, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful**. Could he possibly think this a happy state ? He appeals to their own experience for the contrary : *what fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed†* ? heathen vices then he did not think at all conducive to the enjoyment of life : nor doth he ever intimate, that heathen virtues, were more so, than christian graces. So far as they are both the same, they must have the same effects : and there are few cases, if any, in which the gospel, rightly understood, is more strict than reason, duly cultivated : besides that those precepts of it, which are the strictest of all, perhaps contribute the most of all to our happiness here ; by striking at the root, from whence our faults and uneasinesses spring, and requiring of us that inward self-government which is the only means of true self-enjoyment. There is also another exceeding great advantage of christian virtue ; that the gospel affords such peculiar evidences and means of God's grace and assistance, in proportion as we need it, to do every thing, to which he calls us ; that though we were not to add the consideration of his rewarding us hereafter, yet believers would undoubtedly be capable of going through the same difficulties with much greater spirit, comfort and success, than other men. And accordingly our Saviour assures us that *his yoke is easy, and his burthen light‡*. And St. Paul yet more distinctly asserts, that *godliness*, meaning certainly christian godliness,

* Rom. i. 28—31. † Rom. vi. 21. ‡ Matth xi. 30.

godliness, is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, as well as that which is to come*.

But of whom can it be then, that he speaks, when he saith so expressly, *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable?* I answer, of the very same, whom he denoted, by the word *We*, the last time he used it, but a few lines before: of the witnesses of Christ's resurrection, and the preachers of his gospel; who then suffered many afflictions on account of it in this life; and were wretched indeed, if they had no prospect of being the better for it in another: as were certainly in proportion also their first followers. For in that age, *all that lived godly in Christ Jesus suffered persecution†*; and knew, as the apostle elsewhere reminds them, that *they were appointed thereunto‡*.

Not those duties therefore, which always belonged to the christian profession, but those sufferings, which then attended it, were the reason, that, had not the hopes of a better life through Christ supported them, they had been *the most miserable of all men*. And this appears more plainly yet from the sequel of the discourse; where, resuming this part of the subject again, he doth not argue, *If the dead rise not*, why do we live soberly and righteously; as he doubtless ought to have done, if sobriety and righteousness were prejudicial in this world; but, *if the dead rise not, why stand we in jeopardy every hour§? What advantageth it me, that I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, if the dead rise not||?*

He doth indeed, after this, immediately subjoin, *let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die*. But these words, in the passage of *Isaiab¶*, from whence they are taken, stand in opposition, not to temperance, but to mortification and fasting. And here they do not mean, let us indulge debauchery and excess: but, let us not deprive ourselves, if we can hope for no future advantage from it, of the innocent satisfactions and comforts of life, while it lasts. The expression may indeed sometimes be used in a bad sense: but it is most frequently used in a good one; as, to mention no more, where our Saviour saith of himself, that *he came eating and drinking**?* and where St. Paul pleads, *have we not power to eat and to drink††?* His intention therefore

* 1 Tim. iv. 8. † 2 Tim. iii. 12. ‡ 1 Thess. iii. 3.

§ 1 Cor. xv. 32. ¶ Is. xxii. 13.

** Matth. xi. 19. †† 1 Cor. ix. 4.

therefore was only to say: if there be no resurrection, if Christ be not risen, if his religion can be of no service to us hereafter, let us not make ourselves miserable for the sake of it here: let us not spend our lives, as he elsewhere declares he did his, for the service of the gospel, *in weariness and painfulness, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness**; but renouncing what only brings on us fruitless sufferings, enjoy our ease like other wise men. These consequences he knew would startle those, whom he pressed with them; and shew them the necessity, either of abandoning their faith entirely, which he was certain they would not, or of admitting the resurrection for one article of it.

Upon the whole then it appears, that the persecutions, not the duties of christianity, were what would have made the believers in it miserable, had the hope, which it gave them, been confined to this life. And indeed, though possibly God might have appointed, that doing our duty should be attended of necessity with greater uneasiness and less pleasure here, than transgressing it: yet such a constitution of things would have made his moral perfections, and his providence, much more doubtful; for present appearances would then have been altogether against them: and this would greatly have discouraged the practice of virtue; amongst all men indeed, but especially in those many ages and countries, which had no clear knowledge, whatever glimmerings they might have, of a future state.

It is true, some excellent persons have imagined, that the fewer advantages they allowed to virtue here in their pious discourses and writings, the more fully they should prove it must be rewarded hereafter: and therefore have strenuously pleaded for the present happiness of vice. But we ought not to state things otherwise than they are, in order to draw useful conclusions: and no good will come of it. Being persuaded, that wickedness is happier at present, may incline as many to think God is not displeased with it; as any reasonings from his attributes will incline to think he is. For, if the state of things be contrived by his providence to favour bad men more than good now; this may well raise a doubt, whether the same providence will so certainly do just the contrary in the next world. And a very small hope of escaping punishment there

VOL. II.

M

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* 2 Cor. xi.

will effectually determine men to live as they ought not, if it be acknowledged their interest here. Or supposing it ever so plain, that if virtue, on the whole, suffer in this life, it must be rewarded in another; yet what we call virtue in ourselves will be far from intitling us to such reward. And supposing any creature faultlessly obedient, the justice of God will be bound to bestow on it no greater and no longer reward, than will barely make amends for its sufferings. And if we argue from his goodness; his doing ever so much for it on earth, will be no manner of objection against his doing still more in heaven. For that will be only carrying on a scheme, which he hath already begun, and therefore, we may justly presume, he will complete. If a moral and religious behaviour be according to the natural course of things in this world, beneficial to men, and a wicked and impious one hurtful; as I hope you have often heard them proved to be: then we have clear evidence of fact, that God, who hath made them so, doth actually reward the one and punish the other. And though at present his recompences are neither exactly proportioned, nor without exception constant: yet, as we see many reasons, that may justly occasion this, and cannot but acknowledge there may be many more; there arises, from the whole, great foundation for hope, that the plain distinction, which he hath made already, will be yet more perfectly made in a proper time. So that there is no need for us to apprehend we must necessarily be miserable here, in order to be happy hereafter; or to lie under the imputation of depreciating virtue, and making it good for nothing to its votaries, in this world, in order to secure it a retribution in the next. Reason doth not direct to that method: Revelation hath not taken it; and the teachers and professors of christianity should avoid exposing themselves to a charge, from which christianity itself is perfectly free.

But still, were we to speak of virtue, as always its own reward here, and attaining its end sufficiently in the compass of this narrow life; that would be an extreme on the other hand, and a very pernicious one; whatever great names have countenanced it, some with good designs, and some with bad. Such extravagant praises of moral beauty and excellency will seldom have any other effect, where they have most, than raising an enthusiasm for it, that will be little more than notional, or an
affectation

affectation of it, that will be nothing more than talk. And with the cooler part of mankind, attempting to persuade them of the contrary to what, in many cases, they see and feel, is losing all credit; and making every thing that is said to the advantage of right conduct suspicious, by insisting on more, than can possibly be true.

The real state of the case is plainly this. A temper and behaviour of piety, justice, benevolence, and rational self-government, is fitted in its nature to make our lives here as happy, as we can make them. And therefore, though we had no farther prospect, our present interest would, generally speaking, consist in these things: and would always consist in them, if no particular circumstances happened, to make exceptions. But the misfortune is, that such circumstances do frequently happen. Some men have, from their very constitution, peculiarly strong propensities to sin, which give them long and painful exercise; and, after all, can barely be kept under, not rooted out, let them do what they will. Is this a state of enjoyment, and its own reward? Or a state of warfare, that requires a future recompence, proportionable to the sufferings of it, to make it eligible? but others are yet more unhappy. They have added evil habits to evil inclinations: and, if they will amend their ways, must feel deep remorse for what they have done amiss already; and go through infinite difficulties to do right for the time to come, in contradiction to all their bad customs, their inflamed passions, their vicious friends: must bear great reproach, perhaps undergo much loss, in making reparation for the injuries they have committed: when the whole of this might possibly have been avoided, by persisting in their former course. And, it may be, after all, they have a prospect at most, barely of living long enough to accomplish the change, but not to enjoy it. Who is there now, that can well be more *miserable*, than such a man's resolution of amendment makes him, *if in this life only he hath hope*? Here then is a plain case, in which the belief of a future state is able to defend the cause of virtue, and every thing else unable. But that, already mentioned, of persecution, is a plain-er still. When men are to suffer shame and infamy, penalties and imprisonments, pains and tortures, for the sake of true religion, as multitudes have done; or of moral honesty, as has
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been the case of too many : what is there in the fullest consciousness of doing their duty, sufficient to compensate for these things, to souls of any common make, if such consciousness alone be all the comfort they are to have, and even that very soon, perhaps instantly, to die with them? Undoubtedly the sense of acting as we ought is a powerful support. But, in cases of extremity, it is mocking the miseries of the good, to propose that single remedy, as enough for them. And though it may happen but seldom, that they *suffer a great deal for righteousness sake**; yet they very often suffer more or less for it. And whoever doth not see, how happy it is in every instance of this sort, and how necessary in most, that the encouragements of futurity should come in to the assistance of the present motives to do well : hath either very little attention to the weakness of human minds ; or very little concern to have virtue practised, how vehemently soever he may plead for its being applauded.

I will not enlarge on a farther consideration, though an exceedingly material one, that the sufferings, which mankind in general have to go through, are so frequent and so heavy, that there is much need of a better prospect to alleviate them ; and though the pious and virtuous were never to be the *most miserable of all men*, yet *all men*, in one part or another of their days, would be *miserable* more than enough, *if they had hope in this life only*.

The expectation of future blessedness, therefore, even when it was more doubtful, was *a light shining in a dark place†*, to cheer the fainting hearts, and direct the wandering steps of the children of men. Yet still to have happiness in their view, with such uncertainty, as former ages were in, whether it could be attained or not, must unquestionably mix great anxiety with their expectations ; and leave their circumstances, on the whole, very pitiable. But God, in his mercy, hath removed all doubts from us ; not only by express promises, but an experimental proof also, of a resurrection to life everlasting, in the person of our blessed Lord : that through him we *might have the strongest consolation, when we fly for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us ; which hope we have as an anchor of the soul,*
sure

* 1 Pet. iii. 14.

† 2 Pet. i. 19.

sure and stedfast, and which entereth within the veil; whither also the forerunner is already entered for us, even Jesus.*

You cannot but see then, of what great consequence it is for all wise men to encourage this faith, and all good men to have frequent recourse to it. For the principal reason, why we are so faulty and so wretched in this life is, that we attend so little to the rewards of another. We ourselves perhaps do not suspect, how little it is. Would God that every one who hears me, would make a diligent examination, what share of his desires, his hopes, and his fears, the unseen world takes up; and seriously ask himself, whether it can possibly be fit, that the infinitely most important part of his condition should be allowed so very much the least part of his thoughts.

But then to think of our condition to good effect; we must be sure, not to set our minds more on the privileges, than the duties of it; but remember, that as the virtuous would sometimes be the most miserable of men, if there were no expectation of futurity; so the vicious must be always the most miserable, if there be any. Every promise of the gospel is a threatening to them; and the doctrine of salvation will only condemn them to severer punishments. *Let every man therefore, who hath hope in Christ, purify himself, even as he is pure†. And let every man, who desires to do so, remember, that he can do it only, by a stedfast belief, that Christ died and rose again on our account; for this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith‡: by an humble dependence on grace from above, to be obtained by our prayers; for we are not sufficient of ourselves to do any thing§: and by a diligent and constant use of that grace, in labouring to perform every part of our duty; for we are to work out our own salvation, because God worketh in us, both to will and to do||.*

* Heb. vi. 13—20.

§ 2 Cor. iii. 15.

† 1 John iii. 3.

|| Phil. ii. 12, 13.

‡ 1 John v. 4.

S E R M O N L I.

OF THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY GHOST, AND THE DANGER
OF RASHLY APPLYING IT TO OURSELVES OR OTHERS.

MATTH. xii. 31, 32.

Wherefore I say unto you ; All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men : but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.

And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him : but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world neither in the world to come.

THESE words of our blessed Lord seldom, if ever, fail to excite a peculiar attention and alarm in the minds of all, who read or hear them ; and the doctrine, which they contain, appears to some, either so difficult to be understood, or so improper to be admitted ; and fills others with such terrors, or sinks them into such despondency ; that, for the sake of great numbers, it should be well explained from time to time. And men ought to have the nature of this crime laid before them, when they are not disturbed within by the imagination of having committed it. For when they are, the agitation of their minds too commonly disqualifies them from judging rightly concerning either the sense of the text, or even their own actions.

Now there are several sins against the Holy Ghost, mentioned in scripture ; *lying to**, *resisting†*, *tempting‡*, *grieving§*, *quenching, the spirit||* : yet none of these is ever said to be unpardonable ; and therefore, we may be sure, none of them is so : because, if it had, undoubtedly the word of God would have

* Acts v. 3. † Acts vii. 51. ‡ Acts v. 9. § Eph. iv. 30. || 1 Thess. v. 19.

have given us that warning in relation to it: whereas on the contrary, the text itself, in the plainest words, assures us that every sin is pardonable, excepting one, which is different from all these. If then either the wicked, reflecting on their guilt, or the innocent, overcome with groundless fears, are apprehensive, that they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, as they usually call it, and therefore cannot be forgiven: they should, in the first place, be asked, or ask themselves, and answer distinctly, what sin against the Holy Ghost they have committed? What the particular thing is, that weighs so heavy upon them? For unless it be precisely *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*, there is no pretence for saying, they cannot be forgiven. There are but three passages in the bible, that mention this matter: the text: Mark iii. 28, 29. and Luke xii. 10: in every one of which, the very same word, *blasphemy*, is used; and no other. So that, of whatever sin else against the Divine Spirit they may have been guilty, if they have not been guilty of that, they may undoubtedly be forgiven. And this single observation, duly attended to, is sufficient to preserve, or even restore, the quiet of multitudes. But still too many, for want of understanding the nature of the blasphemy which our blessed Lord here means, may falsely conceive themselves to be chargeable with it: whilst others, of a different turn, may wonder, or be much offended, at finding so terrible a denunciation against it: and a third sort, if they perceive no danger of actually incurring this condemnation, may by no means consider, so seriously as they ought, how near it they may come. I shall therefore endeavour to shew,

- I. What the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, mentioned by our Saviour, is,
- II. What is intended by his declaration, that *it shall not be forgiven, neither in this world nor that to come.*
- III. Why he passes so heavy a sentence on this one sin.
- IV. What things do, or do not, approach towards it.
- I. What the blasphemy against the Ghost, mentioned by our Saviour is.

Now the term *blasphemy*, in the original language of the New Testament, whence we have derived it into our own, signifies nothing else, than speaking evil of any one unjustly. And it is frequently used to denote speaking evil of our equals; but more peculiarly, of our superiors; and therefore, most eminently,

nently, of God the Father Almighty, his Son and Spirit: to which three alone this expression is confined in our vulgar tongue. Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, therefore is speaking irreverently and injuriously of the Holy Ghost: which may be done, by vilifying either his person, or his works. But of the former our Saviour doth not speak: for nothing had happened, which could lead him to it. The *Jews*, whom he was reproofing, professed, and had the highest veneration for the Spirit of God: therefore they had certainly uttered no personal reproaches against him: indeed it doth not appear, that they had named him in what gave rise to the declaration, made in the text. But the case, to lay it before you in the words of the gospel, was this. *There was brought to him one possessed with a devil, blind and dumb; and he healed him; and all the people were amazed, and said, is not this the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, this fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.* It follows, *and Jesus knew their thoughts**. Upon which he argued with them, that destroying the works of the devil, his influence over the bodies and souls of men, could not proceed from the devil himself, for that would be overturning his own kingdom; but evidently shewed a power opposite and superior to his: and then he subjoined the words now under consideration: which many learned interpreters have understood thus: that such, as were ignorantly led by common prejudice to speak against Christ, appearing only as a son of man; and, taking him for a mere man, reproached him with *being the carpenter's son†*, or even *gluttonous and a wine-bibber, and a friend of publicans and sinners‡*; might, notwithstanding, come to see their mistake, and be forgiven: but when he performed miracles, before their eyes, to rectify their opinion, as he had just done then; if they reviled these also, ascribing them to the agency of the devil, contrary to all reason, and perhaps to their own consciences too; (for thus some understand the observation, that *Jesus knew their thoughts*;) this was *adding sin to sin§*; was an effect imputing wickedness to the holy spirit of God, by representing what was plainly done by him, as done by an evil being; and should not be pardoned. Nor can it be denied

* Matth. xii. 22—25.

† Matth. vi. 19. Luke vii. 34.

‡ Matth. xxiii. 55.

§ 1st. xxx. i.

denied, but this interpretation seems to be much confirmed by St. *Mark*, who observes, that our Saviour gave them this warning, *because they said, he had an unclean spirit**.

But still other eminent men, though they allow, that he *cast out devils*, as himself expressly affirmst†, and performed the rest of his wonderful works, *by the Spirit of God*, which is the same with the Holy Ghost; yet remark very truly, that this phrase, *the Holy Ghost*, these words thus joined, in the gospels and acts never signify the power of working miracles, but often signify the spiritual gifts, of speaking with tongues and the like, which the apostles received: and that accordingly, though they had long before done many miracles, as well as their master, we are told notwithstanding in the New Testament, that *the Holy Ghost was not yet given*‡; but promised, after our blessed Lord's ascension. From hence then they argue, that conformably to this manner of speaking, *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost* must mean vilifying, not the miraculous operations, of which the Spirit was the author then; but the farther manifestations of himself, which were soon to follow them; and our Saviour must design in the text to inform his opposers, that all they had said, and all they should say of him, while he remained on earth, as a *deceiver of the people*§ and even one that *had a devil*||, might be forgiven them: but if, when he was gone to the Father; and the *comforter*, or advocate, for so it should be translated, *come*¶, by supernatural gifts to *convince the world of sin, because they had not believed on him*** : if they should go on then to speak evil of these also, their guilt should never be remitted. And, in confirmation of this exposition, they observe further, that Christ, at his death, prayed the *Father to forgive*†† his crucifiers, though at the same time they reviled and derided both him and his miracles; *he saved others, himself he cannot save; let Christ the king of Israel descend now from the cross, and we will believe him*‡‡: and that, suitably to his master's example, St. *Peter* intreated them afterwards to *repent and be converted, that their sins might be blotted out*§§, which therefore was yet possible: but when, they still resisted the Holy Ghost, after these fuller

VOL. II.

N

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* Mark iii. 30.

† Matth. xii. 28.

‡ John vii. 39.

§ John xii. 12.

|| Matth. xi. 18. Luke vii. 33. ¶ John xv. 26.

** John xvi. 8, 9. †† Luke xxiii. 34. ‡‡ Matth. xxvii. 42. Mark xv. 32.

§§ Acts iii. 19.

proofs of his interposition, *contradicting and blaspheming*: then the apostles *turned from them, as unworthy of everlasting life, and went to the Gentiles**.

This later interpretation, I confess, appears to me the more probable. But, in this they agree: that the blasphemy, which is pronounced unpardonable, was not speaking evil of the person of the Holy Ghost, but of the miraculous powers which he exerted: and the difference is only, what miraculous powers are meant; whether those mighty works, which our Saviour performed by means of the Divine Spirit, while on earth; or those gifts, which were poured forth on men, after he ascended to heaven: a question, easy, no doubt, to be answered then; but of no importance to us now.

What we are concerned to remark farther is, that our blessed Lord's denunciation was pointed, not against such blasphemy or evil-speaking, as mere mistake or inconsiderateness might lead men into; but such, as proceeded from wilful and deliberate wickedness: for with this he charges the *Jews*, immediately after the text: *O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh*†. Nor doth he pass so dreadful a sentence on the use of opprobrious language, concerning operations of the Spirit, manifested in distant places or times; but concerning miracles performed, or supernatural gifts exercised, before mens own eyes; for that advantage they, to whom he spoke, enjoyed. Nor did even they fall under this condemnation for every hasty expression of contempt; but for such, as they continued to utter, after a sufficient time allowed them to grow cool and serious, and reflect. For when, upon the apostles receiving the gift of tongues, there were some, that *mocking said, these men are full of new wine*‡: though it was certainly a blaspheming saying in itself, and came from a wrong disposition of mind, and reflected on a work of the Holy Ghost done in their own presence; yet being only a sudden flight, St. Peter did not impute it as blasphemy to them, but merely as rashness of judgment; and therefore applied himself to convince them of their mistake, with so good effect, that 3000 were converted that very day. On the whole, therefore, the only persons, whom we have ground to think guilty of *the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*, meant in the text, are they, who from bad motives,

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* Acts xiii. 45, 46.

† Matth. xii. 34.

‡ Acts ii. 13.

and, as we say, in cold blood, revile and rail against such operations of the Divine Spirit, as are performed in their own presence. Let us now inquire,

II. What is the true sense of our Saviour's declaration, that this one sin *shall not be forgiven, neither in this present world, nor that to come.*

Some have apprehended him to mean only, that all passionate and injurious language on common occasions shall be considered as mere human infirmity, that doth not put men out of a state of salvation; whereas the like language concerning the miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost doth: brings them into a condition of spiritual death here, which, unless they rise again from it by a particular repentance, will be followed by eternal death hereafter. But surely it is taking much too great liberty; first, by *all manner of sin and blasphemy* to understand only all sinful evil-speaking about common matters, though our Saviour hath specified* speaking against himself: then to say, that all evil-speaking about common matters is consistent with salvation; and lastly, when the text affirms peremptorily, that *the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*, and that alone, *shall not be forgiven*; to add, unless men particularly repent of it: a limitation, for which there is not the least authority, and which would bring down this sin to just the same level with many more. Some again think the words of our blessed Lord, though expressed absolutely, are meant only in comparison; that all other sins will be forgiven sooner; and this with the most difficulty of any. But, though doubtless there are some instances, especially in the Old Testament, where what is said positively must be understood comparatively: yet, I think none will be found of that sort, where the assertion is made with such great and calm solemnity, and so circumstantially. Lastly, not a few, observing that in all writers, the most general denunciations often admit no small number of particular exceptions, conceive, that this before us may*. But then some foundation must always appear for such exceptions, either in other passages of the same or other writers, concerning the same matter, or in the nature of the

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thing:

* *Erasmus* in his paraphrase interprets it, *vix inveniet veniam*. And *Latimer* in *Strype's* memorials, vol. 2. p. 70. saith, this sin is called unforgiveable, because seldom forgiven: but on repentance it may.

thing: and no such foundation hath yet been shewn in the present case. Besides, the declaration, that *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven*, is itself an exception from a general rule, that *all manner of sin shall be forgiven*; and to suppose other exceptions again from this exception, seems very unnatural. It would indeed be presumptuous to restrain the mercies of God: but it is equally and perhaps more dangerous to extend them farther, than he permits us.

The addition, that this sin *shall neither be forgiven in this world, nor the world to come*, is taken by many for no more, than a stronger and fuller way of saying, that it *shall not, or shall never, be forgiven*: which are the expressions used in St. Mark and St. Luke. Some understand by it, neither in the age or dispensation of the law, which was then present, when our Saviour spoke; nor of the gospel, which was ready to take place of it: for so the phrases, *this world* and *the world to come*, are used in some passages of the New Testament. But others, with good appearance of truth, carry the meaning further, and apprehend it to be; that, whereas corrections, and severe ones, are inflicted on many sins in this life, which yet, through the grace and mercy of God, are not imputed, to mens condemnation, at the last day: for this sin, on the contrary, both heavy punishment should fall on the guilty here, and heavier yet hereafter. And accordingly, in fact, these blasphemous Jews underwent, in a few years, the most dreadful temporal judgements: nor have we cause to think of their eternal state otherwise, than with great horror. Such then being the sense of our Saviour's words, let us enquire,

III. Why he passed a sentence, thus peculiarly severe, against this one only sin.

Now, had the offence been speaking irreverently concerning the person of the Holy Ghost: it would not have been easy to assign any reason, why that should be less pardonable, than the same irreverence towards the Father, or the Son. But since, as you have seen, it was vilifying his miraculous operations and gifts: there appear in it the most evident marks of such guilt and danger, as could belong to no other. It was the greatest and wilfulest obstinacy in the wrong, that can be imagined; when they, and all around them, saw the most illustrious and beneficial miracles, done in confirmation of the
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most holy and benevolent doctrine, to stand out in opposition to both: to insist, that the devil conspired against himself, rather than own the finger of God, where it was so exceedingly visible: and not only to blaspheme the Son of man thus, during his state of humiliation, at which indeed their prejudices might naturally take some considerable offence; but after he was *exalted by the right hand of God**, and had *baptized his apostles with the Holy Ghost and with fire*, as *John* had foretold he should†; and enabled them by that means, both to do *greater works than himself‡*, and besides to *understand all mysteries§*, to *discern and make manifest the secrets of hearts||*, to *speak with unknown tongues¶*, to *shew beforehand things to come***, to confer the same gifts on whom they would; and when every assembly of christians afforded almost daily proofs of these things; to persist yet, neither *entering into the kingdom of heaven themselves, nor suffering others to enter in††*; and not only to oppose, but to revile, the strongest evidence, laid before them in the fullest manner; and that, very probably, against the secret conviction of their own hearts too: such behaviour manifests the most hardened and desperate wickedness. All men must suppose it, and our Saviour knew it, to proceed from an incurable disease within; prevailing over the powerfulest and last remedy, which divine wisdom thought fit to use: and therefore his declaration, however awful, was but the natural consequence of the state they were in. Had they only doubted, had they only denied, there might have been some hope of them: but when men are come to railing and blaspheming, as they were, they have done with attending and considering. Yet still, had they only rejected the testimony of others concerning the wonderful operations and gifts of the Spirit; stronger testimony of others, or that of their own senses, might have been added: but when this last had been vouchsafed them, there could possibly be no higher. It might indeed appear to them, on maturer reflection, more convincing, than at first: but after sufficient leisure to reflect had been also allowed them, as I have shewn you, it was; every thing that

* Acts ii. 33.

† Matth. iii. 11.

‡ John xiv. 12.

§ 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

|| 1 Cor. xii. 10. xiv. 25.

¶ 1 Cor. xiv. 2, &c.

** John xvi. 13.

†† Matth. xxiii. 13.

that could be done for them, consistently with leaving them freedom of will, had been done, and all in vain.

This, you see, is plainly a very different case from that of any other sin. And the peculiar guilt and danger of it consists, not in its being committed against the Holy Spirit; but in its being a wilful and obstinate rejection, from wicked motives, of the only means remaining for reformation and forgiveness. Suppose the providence of God had so ordered it, that all diseases should be curable, by some one particular course of medicine: still whoever despised and ridiculed that course, instead of taking it, must perish. And in like manner, though all sins would else be pardonable through the grace of the gospel: whoever scorns the utmost efforts of that grace, must fail of it. And our Saviour foreseeing, that these persons would, pronounces their doom. Every advantage, that any others ever were to enjoy, they had enjoyed to the full, without effect: and it was not suitable to the honour of God's government, or the holiness of his nature, to strive with such by still more extraordinary methods; and do for the worst of men, what he had not done for the rest. Their condition, therefore, was not, that they should be denied pardon, though they did repent: but it was foreknown, that they would not repent. So that whoever doth, may be sure, for that very reason, that he hath not been guilty of the unpardonable *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*. Indeed no one now, when, through length of time, the circumstances of the case are so much altered, can lie under the same guilt with those, to whom our Saviour spoke: nor can he therefore be under the same condemnation: for *the judgement of God is always according to truth**. But though we cannot equal the wickedness of the *Jews* in this respect, yet we may come dreadfully near it. And therefore I proceed now to shew you,

IV. What sins do, or do not, approach towards that, which is mentioned in the text.

And here I shall speak separately, first of the case of unbelievers in Christ, then of believers in him.

Unbelievers, ignorant of the gospel, or of its proper evidence, and who could not help their ignorance, are not blameable

* Rom. ii. 2.

able for their unbelief: nor surely inexcusable, though they should add reproachful words to it, *speaking evil of things which they know not**. And though it be a great unhappiness to them, that they have neither the same means of reformation and spiritual improvement, nor the same assurance of pardon and acceptance, that christians have: yet it is their unhappiness only, not their fault. But such unbelievers, as through a contemptuous negligence refuse to consider the doctrine of Christ, or from a vain opinion of the sufficiency of their own reason, or from love to any sin, reject it; these put themselves in the high road towards the sin, condemned here by our Saviour. And if they add to their infidelity profane and irreverent language; they advance nearer to it. But if part of that language be ascribing the miracles and spiritual gifts, mentioned in the New Testament, to an evil power, of which some amongst them have given intimations; and above all, if they do this from a malicious heart, and perhaps against their own inward persuasion too; then they come as near to it, as they are able. And yet one cannot but hope, that since the evidence of the gospel is not either quite so full and strong, or so obvious and easily seen at once, as it was in the days of our Saviour and his apostles; they may, after all, think better of it, repent and obtain pardon.

If indeed they have, since they came to a full use of reason, deliberately professed Christianity, and then forsaken it, and become railers and scoffers at it; this case is worse, than if they had never believed; in proportion as they have seen the evidences, understood the nature, and felt the influences of the gospel; and yet, after all, have broken the faith, which they had solemnly engaged to it. The epistle to the *Hebrews* therefore declares *it is impossible for those, who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame*†. But then, explicit and terrible as these words are, yet some of them plainly relate to those miraculous gifts and powers, which we do not now experience, and therefore cannot

* Jude 10.

† Heb. vi. 4,—6.

cannot sin against them to that degree, nor by consequence make our condition so desperate, as those who did; besides that *impossible*, both in scripture and common language, often means no more, than extremely difficult and hopeless; but not beyond the reach of his grace, *with whom all things are possible**. And as this impossibility is expressly here said to be that of *renewing them to repentance*: (which powerfully firengthens what I have already proved to you, that the *blasphemy against the Holy Ghost* is unpardonable, only because it leaves no foundation to repent upon) so when any one is *renewed to repentance*, this passage contains not the least intimation, that he cannot be forgiven.

But supposing a total and settled unbelief and apostacy to be ever so irretrievable; yet merely having doubted, nay, having inclined to the wrong side, or even been a good deal persuaded of it, and that for some time, is very far from being the same case. The apostles themselves at first did not believe the resurrection of our Saviour: St. *Thomas* stood out a whole week: two of them in St. *Luke* speak of their persuasion, that this was *he who should have redeemed Israel*, as past and at an end†. Yet, as all this arose from infirmity, not wickedness, they met with an easy pardon; and so will others like them. But few of those, whom sensuality, and fewer still, whom vain self-opinion leads to scepticism, ever recover themselves. And as this affords no small confirmation to the awful doctrine of the text: so it should warn all from taking so much as the first steps in that fatal path, from which men so seldom return: but especially against setting out with treating religion and morals in a scornful and ludicrous manner; which is directly opposite to modest and humble inquiry: manifests a very criminal partiality, as well as sufficiency; and naturally terminates in a complete disregard to every thing wise and good.

Thus much concerning infidels and apostates. Christians, while they continue such, are in very little danger of committing the sin, condemned in the text. Some indeed have imagined, that every deliberate transgression amounted to it, and was unpardonable; because the epistle to the *Hebrews* saith, that *if we sin wilfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but*
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* Matth. xix. 26,

† Luke xxiv. 21.

a certain fearful looking for of judgement*. But then it appears very plainly, that not any wilful sin whatever is meant there, but that one only, which is mentioned immediately before and after; laying aside *the profession of the faith, treading under foot the Son of God, counting the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, doing despite unto the spirit of grace*; that is, renouncing and reviling christianity. And it by no means follows, that because they, who have rejected *Christ*, will nowhere find any other atonement for their sins, therefore they who believe in him, but have criminally violated some of his precepts, cannot partake of his atonement, though they apply for it with penitent hearts. It is very true, St. *John* hath told us, *there is a sin unto death*, at least was in those days, of which if any one was guilty, he could give no encouragement to *pray for him*†. But the whole scripture tells us, that not every wilful sin is certainly unto death: and our Saviour in the text hath told us, that only the *blasphemy*, the malicious evil-speaking, *against the Holy Ghost* is such. Now they who believe in the Father and the Son cannot surely think ill either of the person or the operations of the Spirit; and therefore cannot be ordinarily tempted to speak ill of them, with any real meaning of what they say: and unmeaning profane expressions, though undoubtedly very full of guilt, and likely to produce more and greater guilt, are yet far from that most abandoned wickedness, to which the passage before us relates.

Sometimes indeed christians, and very good ones, may accuse themselves of having entertained irreverent thoughts, and, it may be, spoken irreverent words of religion, of the scriptures, of the Holy Spirit himself: but this hath been, when they were under so peculiar a disturbance of mind, that they had not the command of their thoughts or words: and then they may be absolutely sure, that the all-knowing, just, and good God will not consider these offences, as, in a moral sense, theirs. In some disorders, it is no more possible for men to hinder wicked thoughts from taking possession of their minds, or blasphemous words from coming out of their mouths, than to hinder any other distemper, (for plainly this is one) which

VOL. II.

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* Heb. x. 26, 27.

† 1 John v. 16.

may attack any other part of them, from shewing itself by its common effects. And it is no more a crime, when they are in such a condition, to utter things even against God; than it is for a child, in convulsions or light-headed, to strike its parent. And though they may not think themselves disordered, and in other respects may not be so; yet in this want of self-government, proportionably to the degree of it, they certainly are. And it makes no difference at all with regard to their innocence, whether the disorder be a natural bodily one, affecting the mind; which is notoriously the common case, though attended sometimes with very unaccountable symptoms; or whether it arise from the suggestions of the wicked one. For as he tempted Christ himself, so he hath ever since molested christians; and often suggested the worst of things to the best of men. Our words indeed, notwithstanding such temptations, we may for the most part restrain: but we can by no means always prevent impressions being made on our imaginations: and how strongly soever any one may experience them to be made on his, still the wicked thoughts, which he laments all the while, is terrified at, and almost in agonies about, certainly do not proceed from his own will and choice; and for that reason, far from being unpardonable sins, they are in truth no sins at all; but grievous afflictions, for which God will hereafter reward him, if he endeavours to suffer them patiently. This you would immediately perceive, and say, in the case of any other person: and therefore, when occasion requires, you should say it to yourself. But if you cannot, or if it proves to no great purpose, nay to so little that you are driven to the very borders of despair, yet despair itself, so far as it is a mere disease, is not an offence against God.

But then, how remote soever we are from committing the sin, which cannot be pardoned; we may too easily commit such, as will not be pardoned: for none will, without true repentance. And every transgression either invites or drives us into repeated and worse transgressions, which insensibly so *harden us through their deceitfulness**, that though, while the *day of salvation†* continues, we always may repent, it becomes less and less likely, that we ever shall. And even if we do,

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* Heb. iii. 13.

† 2 Cor. vi. 2.

we shall, notwithstanding, even in this world, usually be great sufferers one way or another: and, unless we become uncommonly zealous in our duty, shall attain a much lower degree of happiness in the next. Bear in your minds therefore the son of Sirach's words: *Flee from sin, as from the face of a serpent; for if thou comest too near it, it will bite thee; the teeth thereof are as the teeth of a lion, slaying the souls of men. All iniquity is as a two-edged sword, the wounds whereof cannot be healed**: cannot be healed at all, without danger and difficulty and pain; nor so perfectly at best, but that still either weakness, or scars and deformities however, will be left behind. Let us therefore carefully avoid all sin: but particularly avoid all sins relating to the Holy Ghost, and practise all duties relating to him: that so, abiding in his fellowship, being supported by his testimony, and rejoicing in his comfort, we may at length be sealed with the spirit of promise, the earnest of that inheritance†, to which, &c.

* Ecclus. xxi. 2, 3.

† Eph. i. 13, 14.

SERMON LII.

THE HAPPINESS OF ENJOYING SATISFYING EVIDENCE OF THE
TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY.

MATTH. xiii. 16.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear.

OUR Saviour, in the parable of the sower, which occasioned these words, compares the reception of his doctrine in the hearts of men to that of seed in different sorts of ground. Some are like the high-way, beaten and hard, an open thorough-fare to all comers and goers: there it lies loose on the surface, and is immediately crushed under foot, or *devoured by the fowls of the air*: the very first suggestion of the devil, the world, or the flesh, destroys at once the effect of all the instruction in their duty that is given them. Others resemble a light, but shallow soil, with a rock underneath: where the seed quickly springs up, but is quickly also scorched and withered. They are glad to believe, and forward to profess, what promises the favour of God and future happiness; but impenetrable to all attempts of a thorough change within: bad inclination resists firmly at the bottom, while external performances make a specious appearance to the eye. Whenever the time comes, that they are to suffer or lose any thing for doing their duty, this is much too difficult a service for them; they have no root sufficient to furnish them with strength to bear it; they are burnt up, and shrivel away to nothing. In a third sort, the seed of the word takes deeper hold, and makes very strong and promising shoots: but thorns and bad weeds, the earlier possessors of the field, rise up and choak it. For these grow of themselves: but it requires culture, and watchfulness to root them out: instead of which, too many plant them in the midst of the corn, intangle themselves,

selves, without need, in the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, which they heedlessly indulge, till every better principle is weakened, overshadowed and smothered. But still there remains a fourth sort, *who, in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit**; yet very unequally, *some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty.*

The persons, to whom this doctrine was delivered, gave immediate proof of its truth. The generality, fond of the shew of religion, but dreading to undertake the practice of it in earnest, *hearing heard not, and seeing saw not†*, to any useful purpose, what in this form of speech our Saviour laid before them: as indeed he declares he knew would be their case, and therefore designedly used a manner of expression, which they would not take the trouble, small as it was, to understand‡. For such neither deserved plainer instructions, nor would have made any other than a bad use of them; which could only have increased their guilt. Nay, his disciples themselves apprehended his meaning, though obvious enough, but imperfectly: and desired to have it explained to them§. This however shewed a good disposition: and therefore he not only condescends to their request, but assures them it was a happiness unspeakable to have any degree of proper attention to, and serious sense of, a thing so infinitely important, as God's word. *Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear.* A truth, which, though applicable more eminently, beyond comparison, to those who heard and saw the word of life himself, yet must hold in proportion of all, who are taught, by the ministry of his servants, the christian doctrine. This passage then asserts in a strong manner the benefit of religious instruction: which many appear, unhappily for themselves and others, to undervalue exceedingly.

Indeed we are all very apt to overlook and slight the advantages, that we have long enjoyed without interruption, even in our worldly affairs. Health and plenty, safety and liberty, excite in us very little thankfulness: but the things of another, and, we imagine, distant life, make a still fainter impression. Hence great numbers thoughtlessly disregard religion: and some avowedly disbelieve it. No wonder, if many of these think

† Luke viii. 15. † Matth. xiii. 14. ‡ Ib. § Luke viii. 9.

think teaching it needless, or even hurtful. But others also, who profess to acknowledge the duties, that we owe to our Creator, of a sober, and righteous, and godly life; yet maintain, that in goodness, nay justice, he is bound to make them, and in fact hath made them all, so evident by nature to every man, that we want no farther information to know the whole of them. But how do they prove this? the goodness of God is extended to his various creatures in degrees extremely different; and none is intitled to claim this degree or that. The justice of God permits him to give as low capacities to men as he pleases: and binds him only to require, in proportion to what he gives. Why then may he not put us under a necessity of learning from each other, in a great measure, the way to future happiness, as well as the methods of procuring to ourselves the conveniences and necessaries of common life? should we not be wretchedly furnished with these, indeed should we be able to subsist, were each generation, each man, to provide them for his own use, without being previously taught*? And must we not have been much more at a loss in matters of a moral and spiritual nature? we are endued with reason: but we should apply it very little, if at all, to subjects of this kind; and make a very slow progress in them, if we did; unless education, that is, instruction, opened the way, and directed our steps. We have an inbred sense of good and evil, which enables us, in many things, *of ourselves to judge what is right*†. But then, however it comes to pass, which our boasted faculties will scarce be able to tell us, this moral perception is by no means perfect or distinct; and it is mixed with passions and appetites, far livelier and stronger, that frequently obscure, and sometimes pervert it. Still in fact, the duties of life seem plain to most of us: and so we are tempted to conclude, there is no occasion for instruction in them. But how came they to be thus plain? why, principally because we have always had instruction. Consider those nations that have little: for none are intirely destitute; every where parents teach their children, and all men teach one another, something: but still is the whole of their duty plain to them? There are doubtless parts of it, which they cannot well

* Neque tam est acris acies in naturis hominum & ingeniis, ut res tantas quisquam, nisi monstratas, possit videre; neque tanta tamen in rebus obscuritas, ut eas non penitus acri vir ingenio cernat, si modo aspexerit.
Cic. de Or. 1. 3. § 31.

† Luke xii. 57.

avoid understanding: and they might, with all their disadvantages, understand more than they do: but can they, every one of them, with ease find out the whole? How dreadful a condemnation must they, who affirm this, pass on millions at once, for having found out so little? We christians are more charitable, and think their darkness, though not a justification, yet a considerable excuse: But then we must insist, that light would be a great blessing to them, and that instruction is necessary to introduce it. For what wretched ignorance of most evident, and what strange belief of most absurd, things, in religion and morals, doth all history shew to have prevailed, for successive ages, through nations, knowing and learned in other respects, but untaught in this?

Nay, to look no farther than ourselves; how many do we see of low capacity, that, with the best help, know little, and, with less, would scarce know any thing? How many of better capacity want leisure from worldly cares, and would have no time for improvement, if the frequent return of this day did not give it them? How many, even with leisure, would never turn their minds to the consideration of their duty, if they were not called to it so loudly here, and knowledge in a manner forced upon them? How many indeed, of higher rank as well as lower, appear after all very poorly grounded in the most important principles and precepts?

It must be considered too, that our own reason, had we ever so much of it, and ever so much time and inclination to use it, cannot teach us all that we are concerned to know; but there are doctrines of the greatest moment to fallen creatures, as we are, to be learnt from revelation. Nor is it sufficient, that each man study these in the bible for himself. God hath expressly provided, that some shall instruct others in them. Books, written in distant countries and ages, cannot be intelligible otherwise. And several very interesting parts of scripture are plainly such, that were most men asked, as the Eunuch was by Philip, *understandest thou what thou readest?* they must answer, *as he did, how can I except some man should guide me?* And well may they admit such guides, as desire to lead them, only by proving that the way is right.

But further: were every single dictate, both of reason and
revelation,

revelation, ever so easy to be understood ; yet the number of them, arising from the various relations, in which we stand to our Maker and our fellow-creatures, is much too great to afford any hope of their being all distinctly apprehended by all, unless it be made the business of some, to point them out to the rest. Or, though we could each, of ourselves, form a general notion of the whole : yet particular circumstances often perplex a general duty ; and raise considerable doubts, what ought to be done ; where still it is of great consequence to do right. The very wisest frequently need advice in such cases : much more then must it be of standing use to others.

Besides : what is in itself extremely evident may appear, to a prejudiced mind, uncertain or absurd. And it is very common for men to be prejudiced greatly against plain truths : sometimes through ignorance or weakness ; but much oftener, that wrong belief may quiet them in wrong practice. No one indeed can directly believe what he will, merely because he will : but many have strange arts of misrepresenting things, and putting fair masks upon foul errors : which public instruction is excellently fitted to pull off ; and preserve all, who are not obstinate in cheating themselves, from final ruin. Minds, that have a wrong bias, if suffered to proceed without contradiction, would mould their religion into almost any shape they pleased : and great numbers of well-meaning persons would either fall of their own accord, or be led by others, into childish and hurtful superstitions. For human nature hath always been found exceeding prone to them : and the preaching of the gospel in its purity is the safest and most effectual preservative against them. But it is not superstition, or enthusiasm, alone, that endangers the welfare of mankind, whatever some would have us think. These undoubtedly may be pernicious : but profaneness and profligateness must : which in all ages have been too generally practised, but in ours are openly defended. Such a situation of things makes it doubly necessary, that religion and virtue should have a full hearing. Whoever barely wishes well to civil society, cannot fail to be in some degree concerned for their support. And whoever is in earnest a christian, will think it of the highest importance to the future as well as present happiness of men, that the arguments for our holy faith be proposed to the world in their genuine force ; the objections, which may cause uneasi-

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ness to good minds, and furnish matter of triumph to bad ones, answered : and the disingenuous artifices of unbelievers exposed.

But making known to us what we have to do, to hope and to fear, is only the first advantage of religious instruction. Though we every one of us knew it completely already ; yet unless we always recollected it too, as often as there was need, and were influenced by it, frequent admonition would still continue extremely useful. Very often the most acknowledged truths are the least regarded. They are so familiar to us, that they have no effect, but when placing them in a stronger light awakens us into a distincter attention to them. But especially what affords us no pleasure, as our duty too seldom doth, we are very apt to pass over as slightly as possible. The world attracts our eye with a vast variety of objects, infinitely more agreeable : to these we give up our whole souls, and are totally lost in vehement pursuits or vain amusements. The serious consideration, what we ought to do in life ; and what will follow, if we do it not ; seldom presents itself to us, and is little encouraged, when it doth. If we think, it is of other matters : if we read, it is for other purposes : if we have friends, they will scarce look on it as their business to be more concerned for us, than we are for ourselves : or, if they were, often they dare not attempt to set us right : and too often they, who pass for such, are most artfully industrious to lead us wrong. Then, besides the multitudes of those who are almost absolutely inattentive to their duty, how many are there, who impose on themselves with flattering imaginations, that they perform it faithfully, when they do not : blind to faults and defects, that every one else discerns in them : proud of merely seeming, or merely superficial, good qualities ; and having the *name* and shew of *living*, while indeed they *are dead** ! now both the thoughtless and the presumptuous must be brought to a right sense of their condition, or they are ruined for ever : and what can be so likely to do this, as the voice of public instruction, crying loudly in their ears ; calling the former from follies and vanities to the true business of life, and warning the latter against fatal self-deceit ? admonitions from this place confessedly are founded on such an authority, as warrants us in delivering them with a spirit and boldness, that men would not bear in private : and

* Rev. iii. 1.

no part of our discourses being ever levelled at any one in particular, we can decently and inoffensively reprove, with whatever freedom is requisite, the errors of all in general: *shewing the people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins**.

But, supposing men both acquainted with their duty, and attentive to their failures; they may still have great need of being directed, what method to take in order to a reformation. Not every one, that desires to become good, any more than every one that desires to become healthy, knows the easiest and safest and speediest way to it. Here again therefore such, as have made it their study, may do great service; animating the dejected, confirming the doubtful, strengthening the weak; informing each, what particular dangers are in their circumstances most to be feared, and by what means to be avoided; when to fly from temptation, when to stand their ground against it; how to again advantages, how to retrieve losses, how to bear up under tedious and severe trials; and become, at length, in all things, more than conquerors. Few, it may be feared, are serious enough to think of these helps with the regard, which they deserve. But some, however, God be thanked, both see their usefulness, and have experienced it. Things of this nature, indeed, are often most effectually taught in private: but public instruction also, from time to time, enters far into the particulars of them: though it is, and ought to be, more usually employed in furnishing the more general means and motives to piety and virtue: opposing to the vehement passions that assault men, such lively representations, as every one cannot make to himself, of the reasonableness, the beauty, the excellency, the rewards of religion; the absurdity, the deformity, the present mischiefs, the future punishments of sin; stripping each vice of its specious disguises, and refuting its plausible pretences: administering consolation under the difficulties of duty, and the afflictions of life; and placing, in a strong light, both the glories and the terrors, that are *ready to be revealed†*.

Such are the natural benefits of religious instruction: and evidently none can be greater. If it answers its end but imperfectly,

* Is. lviii. 1.

† 1 Pet. i. 5.

perfectly, and hath often been abused to serve bad purposes : every good thing in the world is equally liable to the same charge. Against abuses, it is perhaps no where better guarded, than this nation ; nor hath ever been freer from them, than at this time. Imperfections will always be found in what men are to execute : and will in all cases be represented by many, as greater than they are. Particularly in the present, some will affect to shew their own wisdom, in censuring what the public wisdom hath appointed ; some will revenge themselves, by condemning an institution, which must condemn the notions they advance, and the lives they lead : some will be prejudiced to its disadvantage by personal or party interests : and others will be provoked, by dislike of particular men, to hate the very office they sustain ; or, by disapprobation of some parts of an establishment, to inveigh against the whole. And very commonly they, who afford themselves the fewest opportunities of being acquainted with public instruction, are loudest in their complaints, of the wrong and wretched manner, in which it is given. Now a candid, or an upright man, would never think himself at liberty, either to find faults without impartial examination, or to exaggerate those which he might apprehend he did find. And a good, or even a prudent man, far from laying too great a stress on accidental or small, defects and inconveniences, would labour to conceal, unless it were in order to remedy, whatever appeared amiss, in a thing of such general usefulness. For, if teaching truth, and cautioning against error ; if setting before men their duty, and their interest : if directing them how to succeed in their views, and how to escape dangers ; if supporting them in a right course of action, and deterring them from a wrong one, be of service in any of our concerns ; it must be of most service in the most important one of all, religion. And whoever hath need, either to be taught what he did not sufficiently know, or to be reminded of what he did not sufficiently consider ; to be restrained from doing evil, or excited to do good ; to be comforted under the afflictions of life, or encouraged against the fears of death ; may certainly be the better, if he will, for the preaching of God's word. There are few, one should imagine, so perfect, as not to have room left for receiving advantage from it, in some of these ways.

And whoever conceives he is, cannot with any decency tell the world so ; which in effect he doth, by staying away from it. At least, he cannot think the bulk of mankind hath attained to this height of knowledge and goodness : and therefore he ought to countenance, by his example, what may in all likelihood be of the greatest benefit to those amongst whom he lives ; and, in proportion as it amends and improves them, will be of no small benefit to himself.

For, that instruction always hath had, and will have, a mighty influence on the belief and practice of mens duty, not only the nature of the thing, but the testimony of all history, sacred and profane, shews. Our first parents were instructed by their Creator. Had they not ; how quick soever the improvements of a self-taught philosopher may be, when described from mere imagination, yet reason and fact make it highly probable, that even had they continued innocent, they would have been very ignorant for a considerable time. But the entrance of sin must enfeeble and darken their understandings greatly : and had their knowledge of what they were to do, been ever so clear, yet, what they were to expect, and on what terms, when they had failed of doing it, must be so very obscure, that it was of the utmost importance for God to interpose and inform them ; as we find in scripture he did by the immediate notification of a Redeemer. Divine instruction therefore began religion ; and human hath preserved it. Hence that honourable character, given to *Abraham* by God himself : *For I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him ; and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgement**. This pious care, for which he was distinguished, seems to have been falling into disregard amongst the other men of that age. And the consequence was, what it always will be. The separation of instruction from worship separated morals from piety : and, when this unnatural divorce brought them to be considered, as independent things, the obligations to virtue were fatally weakened, the notions of religion were greatly corrupted, and, in proportion as ignorance increased, wickedness and superstition prevailed.

Still

* Gen. xviii. 19.

Still there were, in the heathen world, persons very eminent for great and good qualities. And as no stated public instruction was established among them*, they are sometimes produced, as arguments against the need of it. But their number by no means appears to have been considerable. Less had been said of them, if the generality of their countrymen had been like them: and what is said, is delivered by authors, chiefly desirous of gaining honour to themselves, by drawing beautiful pictures of the merit of their heroes. Yet, after all, we find that merit, even according to the most favourable accounts of it, which heighten it far beyond truth†, mixed with great blemishes. Their piety, the first article of human duty, if they had any, (for several of their systems of philosophy were inconsistent with or unfavourable to it) was grossly idolatrous: their love of their country was greatly injurious to their neighbours; especially those whom they were pleased to call barbarians: most of them were polluted with unlawful, some with unnatural lusts: and none of them ever shewed that humility of heart, and deep sense of imperfection and sin, which belongs to the very best of human creatures. Still, shining accomplishments they undoubtedly had: but they had also generally private instructors at least, from whose lessons they might in a good measure derive them? or copied them, though not taught in form, from those, with whom they conversed. Or supposing the contrary; in every science, in every common art, some few will make a great progress with small advantages for it: but shall we conclude from thence, that any sort of knowledge can become general, without being generally taught; and every one do what no one is exhorted, or assisted, to learn? Besides, the original poverty and frugality, the accidental necessities and distresses, nay the unaccountable fashions and fancies of some countries and ages, have brought particular virtues into practice and high repute, and they have been greatly celebrated for them; though deserving of the severest censure for their faults in other respects. And, bad as we are at present; it would be doing us great injustice, to prefer upon the whole, perhaps the best of the heathen times, but certainly the common run of them, to ours.

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* See Aug. de Civ. Dei. l. 2. c. 4, 6, 7, 16, 22, 26.

† See Leland against Tindal, Introd. p. 46, &c.

The number is great in itself, though small in comparison, of such as infinitely excel, in piety, in benevolence, in purity of heart, the utmost perfection, to which men, without the grace of the gospel, could attain. But not to insist on these, we are without question in general not only more rational in our devotions, but milder in our treatment of each other, and more regular in our conduct of ourselves. An impartial reader of the *Greek* and *Roman* authors, especially of such as lived in the times of which they speak, will easily see and acknowledge this. But were it otherwise, their wanting instruction, and our having it, cannot possibly be the reason, that we are inferior to them: but we, without it, should have been still much worse; and they, with it, still much better. Indeed, they were sensible, whatever we are, how great need they had of it: and accordingly the best of them, some after taking long journeys to inform themselves, made it their business to teach others, who applied to them, the wisest rules they could, for the conduct of life. But they plainly found, both their knowledge so imperfect, and their authority so insufficient; that they declared, of their own accord, what many now set themselves to deny; that interposition from above was requisite to inform and influence mankind.

This advantage the posterity of *Abraham* enjoyed. And though they did not receive from it near the good they might; as indeed we none of us ever do from any advantage; yet it produced, besides the more distinguished examples of piety and holiness, mentioned in scripture, and doubtless many others, a considerable degree of national faith in the one true God, and obedience to his laws; which was not only a blessing to that single country, but scattered some rays of light through all the people, that sat in darkness round them. And no sooner had they learnt from their captivity, inflicted on them for their neglect of the divine commands, to set up and carry on a more constant and extensive course of instruction, than they had done before, by *reading* and interpreting the scriptures *every Sabbath Day in the synagogues** of every city; than their inveterate, and till then incurable, disease of idolatry ceased from amongst them almost intirely; and they preserved

* Acts xv. 21.

preserved for many ages a more uniform regard to their duty, than they seem to have had, ever since they were a nation.

But at length, even this method of instruction being corrupted by the established dispensers of it, *the light itself became darkness**. And then was the proper season for the great enlightener of the world to appear: who detected and condemned the abuses of this institution, placed the conduct of it in better hands, and forbade his followers for ever that blind submission to *the doctrines of men, which had made the commandments of God of no effect†*. Nor did he only purify, but perfect it with inestimable additions of new knowledge: whence he tells his apostles, immediately after the text: *Verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them*. After which, his concluding care was to provide, by due regulations, for the perpetual support of this ordinance; and promise the ministers of it, that *he would be with them alway, even unto the end of the world‡*. We are therefore not only to esteem it, as a prudent and useful thing; but to reverence it, as the appointment of our Lord and Master; and attend on it in faithful expectation of his blessing. For under whatever disadvantages of human weakness the gospel is often preached, it is still *the power of God unto salvation§*, to all that hear it, as they ought. Nor can we hope, that he who *resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble||*, will give it those, who set up their own wisdom against that of heaven; which hath expressly ordained *pastors and teachers, for the edifying of the body of Christ¶*. And so effectually did this method, unassisted by human art or power, build up the church in spite of all opposition of every kind; that, in a small compass of time, the christian faith was diffused through the earth, drove atheism, idolatry and vice into corners, wherever it appeared; and planted in their stead, rational piety, benevolent virtue, moral self-government, founded on the sure prospect of eternal felicity.

Happy

* Matth. vi. 23.

§ Rom. i. 16.

† Matth. xv. 6, 9.

|| James iv. 6.

‡ Matth. xxviii. 20.

¶ Eph. iv. 11, 12.

Happy would mankind have been, had the purity and good influence of this excellent doctrine been preserved, by a careful use of the means, that recommended it first. But, by degrees, preachers *handled the word of God deceitfully**, and hearers *turned away their ears from the truth unto fables†*: instruction was partly perverted, partly disused: error and superstition returned in a new form, and ignorance and wickedness again overspread the world. Once more, two centuries ago, the restoration of a preaching ministry restored truth and freedom amongst us: and keeping up a due respect for it, is our great security against the dreadful alternative of open profaneness and profligateness, or Popish darkness and tyranny: the former of which evils, in all likelihood, if ever it prevails, will soon make way for the latter. And therefore religious instruction, which guards us at once against both, is a most important public good.

Its private advantage to particular persons seems indeed often to be small. Multitudes there are, as bad, notwithstanding it, as one can well imagine they would be without it: and for this reason some deny its benefit. But surely it is a strange objection against the usefulness of a medicine, that they who refuse to take it, or neglect to take it regularly, are never the better for it. Many despise and ridicule this institution; and yet from time to time gravely complain of the little good it doth, whilst they are diligently endeavouring, that it shall do still less. And of the rest of mankind, few attend it so constantly as they ought, and fewer still with a due degree of right disposition. Yet after all, the number made truly and inwardly religious and virtuous by it, is not contemptible; those that are amended in part, or kept back from being mischievously wicked, are very large: and in how much worse a condition we should quickly be, were it laid aside, is abundantly more easy to foresee, than safe to try. Too much trial indeed we have had already: more than enough to find, that as the contempt of God's word and worship increases, idleness, debauchery, dishonesty, spread through the generality of mankind: evils, which one should think every one is greatly concerned to prevent, but especially the upper part of the world,

both

* 2 Cor. iv. 2.

† 2 Tim. iv. 4

both for the sake of their inferiors and their own. How far the same bad consequences have taken place amongst themselves, might perhaps appear disrespectful to say: but we may surely beg, that they and all men would seriously consider, what one good effect they have ever observed to follow from disregarding the appointed exercises of religion: in what better way the time, allotted for these exercises, is generally employed by those, who frequent them not; and what harm could possibly follow, if, from obedience to the command of God, from a respect to public authority, from concern for public welfare, from tenderness for their own private reputation, and (may we not add ?) from hope of possibly receiving some little improvement too, they should prevail on themselves to spend at church, every week, a few of those hours, which they do not seem, on other occasions, to reckon so very precious. Doing this, and requiring those who depend on you to do it also, you cannot have occasion to regret very bitterly: omitting it, whatever you think now, perhaps you may, certainly you will, repent: God grant the time may come, before it is too late. Let us therefore now make this, amongst others, one trial of our spiritual state, whether *we have loved the habitation of God's house, the place where his honour dwelleth**: whether *we receive the word with all readiness of mind†*, and *desire the sincere milk of it*, as St. Peter expresses himself, *that we may grow thereby‡*. If not, let us stir up ourselves to the more constant and zealous practice of a duty, which the apostle to the *Hebrews* enjoins as an indispensable one, even in the midst of severe persecutions: with whose words I conclude. *Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, and provoke one another unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching§*.

* Ps. xxvi. 8.

† 1 Pet. ii. 2.

† Acts xvii. 11.

§ Heb. x. 23, 24, 25.

S E R M O N LIII.

THE QUALITIES OF A PIOUS AND DEVOUT HEARER OF THE
WORD OF GOD.

LUKE viii. 18.

Take heed therefore how ye hear.

EVERY advantage, bestowed on us by providence, is a trust, of which we must hereafter give account. The advantages, which tend more immediately to our improvement in piety and virtue, are a trust of the most important kind: and religious instruction holds a principal rank among these. Its nature is excellently fitted to do men good: the grace of God is ever ready to accompany it: and yet very frequently it fails of its end. Doubtless too often this is our fault, who are employed to dispense it. We do not preach, we do not live, as we should: may God be merciful to us and amend us: for heavy will be our condemnation, if we wilfully transgress, or supinely neglect, either part of our duty. But the word of God, even when delivered by unskilful and wicked hands, hath power enough to produce its effect, if received as it ought: and though delivered by the ablest and best, too commonly, for want of being so received, produces none. *Preachers of righteousness*, from the days of *Noah** to this, have found their warnings in a great measure fruitless. Prophets, expressly commissioned from heaven, have been rejected or disregarded by those, to whom they were sent. Nay, the Son of God himself, as indeed his whole history, but especially his parable in this chapter shews, met with many, in whose hearts his doctrine either gained no reception, or soon withered away, or was choked with thorns; for a few, who brought forth good fruit, in a greater degree or a less. And if it was needful for him,

* 2 Pet. ii. 5.

him, who *spake as never man did**, who confirmed his discourses by miracles, and adorned both by a life of perfect holiness, to bid his apostles themselves *take heed how they heard*: much more ought his ministers now to give his people the same caution, and they to observe it. You think, and they, very truly, that a great deal is incumbent on us, but do you consider, what is incumbent on yourselves? Our reasons to desire that our preaching may be successful, are very strong: but yours are yet stronger. If we fail of converting you, provided we endeavour it faithfully, we have *delivered our own souls*: but if you fail of being converted, you *die in your iniquity*†. The gospel is *the savour of life or of death*‡, to all that hear it. Those, who are careful to improve by it, God will bless with further improvements: those, who are not, he will leave in his just judgement to grow worse and worse: or, to speak the language of our Saviour just after the text; *Whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have*.

Being therefore so deeply concerned in the matter, let us all consider, with what disposition of heart we ought to receive religious instruction.

1. And in the first place, that we should hearken to it with attention, is exceedingly plain: for else both speaking and hearing are lost labour. And yet how many are there, who vouchsafe not even so much regard to the doctrine of salvation? Decency perhaps brings us hither: and a failure of making our appearance might be remarked to our disadvantage: but whether our minds are absent, cannot be so easily observed: and therefore about that, we are very indifferent. Or we come of course; without reflecting, what end is designed to be served by it: and, though our consciences would not let us stay away, yet we have never bethought ourselves, that being here without any care to become the wiser for it, amounts very nearly to the same thing. Most however have surely some general intention of minding what they are about: but in so weak a degree, that every suggestion of every kind overpowers it. Some set their hearts on the affairs, and some on the pleasures of life so intirely, that these objects croud in at the most improper times, and drive out all others. Too many have indulged an indolent thought-

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lessness,

* John vii. 56.

† Ezek iii. 19.

‡ 2 Cor. ii. 16.

lessness, till applying their minds in earnest to any thing is become extremely difficult and painful to them. Not a few are engaged so deeply in observation of what they see at church, that they have no room left for taking notice of what they hear. There are persons too, who have so much to say one to another, that they lose, and make those around them lose, much of what the preacher hath to say to them all. And frequent mutual informations, it seems, are of such importance and necessity to be communicated immediately, that even the duties of hearkening to God's word in the lessons, and singing his praises in the psalms, must give way to them. But indeed the best disposed, and most considerate, are not so happy always, as to command their own thoughts. Our imaginations, however carefully checked, are too apt, on every occasion, to present us with a multiplicity of fancies and notions, quite foreign to the business we are upon: but never more so, than in the midst of our religious exercises. And when once our minds are got loose; an effect, which the least accident will produce; then on they run from one thing to another, hanging together by some kind of whimsical connection, till we are carried we know not whither: and if we try to recover ourselves, are often lost a second time in the very endeavour. Some degree of this is merely the weakness of our fallen condition: and some have by nature more of it than others: for which they have indeed cause to be sorry, yet not to think despondingly of their spiritual condition. But still, too much of it is commonly our own fault. We have taught ourselves to be so unsettled as we are, by indulging a languid indifference to the most interesting of all our concerns; and perhaps too, by delighting in the vain amusement, which these roving ideas give us, at the most improper seasons. The cure of this bad habit is very difficult: and therefore our watchfulness against its growing upon us ought to be the greater: and our attempts to root it out, more closely followed. We must beg of God pardon for our past neglects, and assistance for the time to come. We must imprint on our minds, beforehand, as deeply as ever we can, the importance of instruction in our duty: and come to it with the most deliberate and firmest purpose of strict attention. We must call ourselves back immediately, when
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we find we are wandering: and without staying at all to discover what it was, that led us off, return without delay to the subject before us. We must also make it a rule to recollect afterwards the principal things, that have been said to us. For not only this will tie us down to mind them the more, when they are spoken; but minding them ever so much just then, will singly be of small benefit: we must think them over and over at home, till we digest them into lasting nourishment; and, as the apostle directs, give such *earnest heed to the things which we have heard*, that we may not at any time, let them slip*.

2. But hearing God's word with attention will probably do us no good, unless, in the second place, we hear it also without prejudice against it: for else we shall attend to it, only to find fault, invent objections, and so lead ourselves into error; which may be worse than ignorance. Now unreasonable partiality is blame-worthy in all cases: but extremely so, when it operates to the disadvantage of religion. The doctrines of natural piety and morality are confessedly of the plainest and greatest use to the present peace and comfort, as well as the future happiness, of mankind. And those which revelation hath added, illustrate, confirm, and supply the defects of the former, in the most perfect degree. Prepossession therefore against either, is opposition to our own chief good, to that of the world in general: and every worthy, every prudent man, who at all understands what christianity is, cannot but hearken to it with delight, and heartily wish to find it true; and when he is convinced it is, desire to have it constantly inculcated on himself and his fellow-creatures, throughout the earth. To vain and vicious minds indeed hearing it faithfully preached must give uneasiness. But still such preaching is the most real, the most seasonable and necessary kindness, that can be done them. Unwelcome truths will be never the less truths, but much the more dreadful, for their studying to disbelieve them. And therefore the wicked, beyond all others, are concerned, to take notice of the threatenings of the gospel, lay hold on its mercies, and examine their lives by its precepts; whenever they know, or but suspect, they have acted wrong. Nay, suppose

* Heb. ii. 1.

pose they have no suspicion of that sort, yet unprejudiced attention to the preaching of it can do them no harm; and may do them more good, than they think of. We require no implicit submission to what we teach. We warn you against it. So far as our doctrine is discerned by your reason, or felt by your consciences, to be true: or appears to stand on the testimony of God; so far only believe us. *We speak as to wise men; judge ye what we say**. All that we ask is, judge uprightly. For prepossession hurries people to condemn what they will not have patience to understand: they imagine articles of faith to be unintelligible, and rules of life to be unreasonable, without the least foundation; and alarm themselves and others with phantoms, the mere creatures of their own fancies.

But though irreligious prejudices always prevail too much: yet there are times, when fashion gives a more than ordinary countenance to them: when all, that would make a genteel figure, must throw aside the antiquated notions of learning their duty; and think, or seem to think, ill or meanly of those who are to teach it. Now whether you have need to learn any thing which you did not know, or be reminded of any thing which you had forgotten, or be excited to any thing which you neglect, or dissuaded from any thing which you practise, I must leave to your own consciences. The word of God, the wisdom of all civilized nations, the judgement and experience of all wise men declare that every one hath need of these things. And as for us, whose business is to teach: paying us too much regard, we acknowledge, is a dangerous temptation to us; and may do, and hath done, great harm to true religion, to virtue, to human society: but paying us too little, is full as likely to do harm. And we appeal to yourselves: which extreme are the people of this land at present most inclined to? Certainly you ought to have your eyes open to our faults and imperfections: else they will encrease: but you ought to consider at the same time, how difficult it is for any set of men, and for us in particular, to behave so unblameably, as we should. And indeed while we discharge our office with any good degree of faithfulness, the beneficial nature of it should methinks intitle

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us to some peculiar share of the good-will and candour of mankind. At least, no one should, either designedly or inconsiderately, make such harsh interpretations of what we say or do, as would be universally thought unjust, or uncharitable, with respect to any other men. For such treatment will not only injure us, but make us in a great measure useless to those under our care: which is a matter of public concern. They, who are instructed or admonished by one, of whom they think amiss, let him lay before them ever so important truths, very seldom take much notice of them. Yet this is one prejudice against which you ought to guard with your best diligence. The *Scribes* and *Pharisees* were both ill men, and our Saviour's bitterest enemies: yet since they *sat in Moses' seat*, were the authorized instructors of the people, he commanded his disciples to *observe and do whatsoever duties they bade them**. Ask your own hearts then, are you thus disposed in relation to every truth, which you hear from us; of whom, we hope, you have cause to entertain a somewhat better opinion, than of them?

But they, who have no general prejudice against religious instruction or the dispensers of it, have notwithstanding too often very blameable antipathies to particular subjects. Some are highly pleased, when we enlarge on points of faith: but hate to hear those of practice much enforced. Others are for practical discourses only: and forget, that faith is the necessary foundation of them; and if it were not, that God hath the same right to our believing what he teaches as to our doing what he requires. Some would have preaching consist wholly of moral doctrines; and hold piety in contempt, as an useless enthusiastical thing: though both reason and scripture say, *it is the first and great commandment*†. Others despise morality, as an inferior heathenish attainment: and think only the sublimer parts of religion should be taught: though the apostle saith expressly, *I will that thou affirm constantly, that they, who have believed in God, be careful to maintain good works: these things are good and profitable unto men*‡. Many will pay great attention to the gracious promises of the gospel: but

* Matth. xxiii. 2, 3. † Matth. xxii. 33. ‡ Tit. iii. 8.

but little or none to its laws and threatnings. Or, if they are willing we should dwell on some precepts, which not they, but their neighbours, transgress; still they turn a deaf ear to all that can be said on others: and one would except his unjust gains, a second his vicious pleasures, a third his vain amusements, a fourth his ill humour, a fifth his causeless separation, from being any proper matter of our animadversion. In short, with most hearers, some points are in such favour, that they can hardly be repeated too often, or carried too far: and others so unwelcome, that the very mention of them gives offence. They have not patience enough to discern the true state of the question: much less to observe the force of the arguments for it; or consider the answers to their objections against it: but reject immediately with anger, whatever thwarts their inclination, or preconceived opinion: unmindful of the prophets reproof to the Jews of old: *This is a rebellious people, that will not hear the law of the Lord; which say to the seers, see not: and to the prophets, prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits**. But however apt we are to think otherwise, both our business and our interest is, not to shut our eyes against instruction, but make use of the light it offers; not to fence against conviction, but lay open our hearts to the impression of truth, be it ever so painful; and receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save our souls†. For those duties, which we the least like to hear of, may be, and often are, the most needful to be inculcated upon us of all others. Those doctrines, of which we are the most firmly persuaded, may, for aught we know, unless we have examined them well, be great mistakes. And even supposing them true, yet attending only to one part of the truth, may lead us into error.

3. The third disposition, requisite in attending on the word of God, is seriousness of heart. There are many, who have no positive prejudices, founded on seeming arguments against it, but so thoughtless and giddy, that they slight it most surprisingly. At best, they look on what is delivered from hence, as something of course to be said, and not to be minded. But
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* Is. xxx. 9, 10.

† James i. 21.

in their livelier moods they can divert themselves extremely with the most solemn exhortations ; and their gaiety is apt to rise the higher, the more earnestly their duty is pressed upon them. Now undoubtedly the exertion of a cheerful temper, when regulated by good sense and propriety, is very innocent, as well as agreeable. But to seek for matter of drollery in every thing ; and dress up subjects of the utmost importance in ludicrous disguises, to delight ourselves and others with laughing at them, is the silliest affectation of wit, and the most dangerous kind of folly. Remember then : what your Maker enjoins, what your eternal happiness or misery depends on, is worthy of the most awful attention, even of the most sprightly mind : besides that the same levity, which inclines men to play thus with religious truths, usually disposes them to treat the weightiest affairs of common life with the same sort of sportful indiscretion, till at length *the end of that mirth is heaviness**, even in this world.

Sometimes indeed want of serious regard to what we hear, may not seem altogether inexcusable. Subjects of the greatest moment may be handled so improperly, as to disgust even the well-meaning ; and possibly raise contemptuous, instead of devout reflections. But as it must be a very wrong heart, that takes occasion to be thus moved, where none is given : so if much be given, which surely is not frequently the case, it cannot be a right heart, which dwells on such things only, or chiefly. Consider : here you come, in obedience to the appointment of God, to learn or recollect the doctrines and the precepts, that lead to salvation. One or more of them are accordingly laid before you and recommended to you : but unhappily with some peculiarity, it may be, of phrase or manner ; some arguments not of the strongest, some irregularity of method, or want of liveliness or prudence : in short, some mixture or other of human infirmity. Ought these defects, be they ever so real, though possibly after all they are but imaginary, to change the important business you are upon, into an ill-natured amusement : and turn you aside, from the improvement of your own souls, to an idle criticism upon another man's performance ? Or is it the concern of every one of us, to profit by all we can, supply what is wanting, add strength to what is weak ; and pass lightly over the imperfections of our instructors, remembering our own ?

But they, who by no means hear sermons with contempt, will yet be far from due seriousness, if they hear them only with curiosity. And this it may be feared is a very common case. We want to have some fashionable controversy discussed, some difficult passage of scripture explained, some darling speculation enlarged on, some plausible hypothesis proposed: in a word, something told us, that may prove a pleasing exercise of our understandings at the time, and a help to conversation afterwards. Discourses, of which we can make this use, we seldom think of putting to any better; of such as we cannot, we soon grow weary, and hearken impatiently after other *teachers, having, as the apostle expresses it, itching ears**. Thus we pay most earnest attention to what we hear: and receive absolutely no good from it. For filling our heads, in this manner, is rather the way to corrupt our hearts, than to amend them. Learning and ingenuity are doubtless of great service in explaining, defending, and adorning religion. But still the things, which a serious man will chuse to have most insisted on in the pulpit, are those, which he is most concerned to practise, and most liable to fail in, the plain common rules of a christian life. There is nothing new perhaps in such discourses: nothing, but what you have often heard and well remember. But have you minded it as effectually as you ought? Searching into this may possibly be new enough to you; how agreeable, God and ourselves know best: but it is needful, without question. Repeating to you ever so often the precepts, which you are conscious you observe, will give you pleasure. And the more unpleasing the repetition of the rest is, the more necessary it will be. "This kind of preaching hath no entertainment in it." Very true. But is it for entertainment that you come to the house of God? Such as do, must not take it amiss to be disappointed; but submit, instead of what they wish, to have what they want, given them; the knowledge of their duty, their sins, their Saviour, their grounds of hope or fear in relation to eternity. At least, whatever they might like for themselves, they must permit others to *have the gospel preached to them†*.

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* 2 Tim. iv. 3.

† Matth. xi. 5.

But supposing you are ever so desirous to hear sermons, ever so proper: on what account do you desire it? Perhaps only to enjoy the satisfaction, which a well composed discourse naturally affords. Your ear is gratified, your sentiments are enlivened, agreeable emotions of various kinds are excited. So the hearer is pleased, the speaker commended, and followed; but with no thought of practising one word he hath said. This is the turn of mind, so admirably described, many ages ago, by the prophet *Ezekiel*. *Son of man, the children of thy people still are talking of thee* by the walls and in the doors of the houses, and speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, come, I pray you, and hear what is the word, that cometh forth from the Lord. And they come and sit before thee as my people; and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness; their worldly desires of whatever sort. And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they do them not†.* Religious instruction could never be appointed to give such empty, insignificant delight as this: nor doth it in the least attain its proper end, unless it influences men to forget the preacher, and think of themselves: unless it raises in them, not a superficial complacency, or an idle admiration? but an awful solicitude about their eternal welfare, and that a durable one.

Constitutional warmth of temper is often blown up into a pious flame, that goes out almost as suddenly, as it was kindled. Lively affections are experienced; excellent designs are formed; every thing promises wonderfully well for a time; and then sinks down into nothing. Or, it may be, men are moved anew, and resolve anew, at every good sermon they hear: but they cool again long before the next, and bring no fruit to maturity. Now a life of religious feelings and intentions,

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* This is the marginal, and the right translation.

† Ezek. xxxiii. 30, 31, 32.

See an excellent discourse of *Masonius* the philosopher on this subject. *A. Gell.* l. 5. c. 1. See also *Arr. Epict.* l. 3. c. 23. And the character of *Socrates's* discourses given by *Alcibiades* on his own experience. *Plat. Conviv.* See also *Seneca*, Ep. 52.

tions, with an irreligious failure of acting suitably to them, is not the life of a christian, nor will it ever procure us the reward of one.

4. There still remains then a fourth requisite, without which, however attentive, impartial, and serious, we are, we shall fall short; but towards which all these qualities greatly contribute: and what that is, the apostle plainly signifies to us, where he saith, *The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith, in them that heard it**. And the faith, that we must have, to make it profit us, is not a mere historical persuasion of the truth of the gospel, though with this we are to begin; but a deep sense of our need of God's mercy promised in it; a thankful acceptance of the terms, on which that mercy is offered; an humble reliance on a crucified Saviour for pardon, grace and strength; with a firm dependance on having these blessings conveyed to us, through a right use of the means which he hath ordained for that end; his word, and sacraments, and prayer. Such *faith* indeed must *come by hearing* at first, as the apostle hath observed†. But this is no objection against the necessity of exercising it afterwards, in order to hear as we ought: and exercising duly our present lower degree of it, is the only way to obtain a higher. Every one therefore, who desires benefit from religious instruction, must attend on it with humility of heart, as a falling, sinful, undeserving creature; to whom it makes known a method of recovery, which of himself he could never have found out or imagined. He must *receive it*, when delivered conformably to scripture, *not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God*‡, must labour to strengthen his conviction of these things. He must apply earnestly to him, whose gift faith is, for that *faith* in his gospel, *which worketh by love*§. For when once we come to love our Maker, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier, we shall hear the very hardest parts of our duty with willing minds, and perform the whole with a cheerful and persevering zeal; till which time, all remains imperfect and ineffectual. Every attainment that comes short of uniform universal obedience, however specious it be, leaves us in effect very nearly, if not quite, where we were. St. James's comparison is perfectly just.

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* Heb. iv. 2.

† 1 Thess. ii. 13.

‡ Rom. x. 17.

§ Gal. v. 6.

*Be ye doers of the word ; and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a bearer of the word and not a doer ; he is like unto a man, beholding his natural face in a glass. For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way ; and strait way forgetteth, what manner of man he was**. Yet this too plainly appears to be the common method. A great part, even of those, who come to hear from a principle of conscience, such as it is, mind exceedingly little at the time, reflect less afterwards, and continue just the same men they were before. They wonder indeed, that their neighbours take no more notice of what is said : and can even wrest passages in sermons to meanings, which they were never intended to have, and are scarce, if at all capable of, in order to point them against the faults of others ; while they think not in the least of correcting their own, be they ever so plainly described : as if religion were made for every one else to practise, but themselves. It would really seem quite impossible, if daily experience did not shew it, that men could be told so plainly, and warned so frequently, of transgressions and follies, which they cannot deny to be such by which often they not only do great harm, but suffer great uneasiness, in this world, and which they are sensible must bring on them, if not forsaken, the heaviest vengeance of God in the next ; yet sit all the while as unconcerned, as if the discourse were about some perfectly indifferent matter ; and go away at last, without so much as a single thought of ever changing their conduct. Or if they do think of reforming, it is at some distant time ; like *Felix, when they have a convenient season*† ; and this they look on as a very pious intention : whereas indeed it is only determining to live on wickedly for the present, and leave off they know not when. Or they resolve from henceforward to perform some part of their duty, the more easy, or profitable, or fashionable, perhaps : but neglect the rest, as much as ever. Or they go farther, and will break loose from all their sins : but they will not avoid those temptations, that must in all likelihood bring them back soon into their former bondage ; nor make use of those means, that would *preserve* them from it. Thus, one way or other, they contrive to *hear the word, and not to do it* ; and all they get by this artful management, as St. James, in the passage above-mentioned, hath

* James i. 22, 23, 24.

† Acts xxiv. 25.

hath excellently observed, is *deceiving their own selves*. For God we can never deceive; men we very seldom do; nay even ourselves, for the most part, we are able to cheat but poorly; and could we succeed in it as completely, as we wish, we should be only the more irretrievably ruined.

Take heed therefore, how ye hear; and begin your care with considering so seriously, and improving so faithfully, what hath been delivered to you for that purpose now, that you may reap the truest and utmost advantage you can, from whatever shall be any where taught you hereafter. Laying aside all malice, and all guile and hypocrisy, as new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: to him be glory, both now and for ever. Amen†.*

* 1 Pet. ii. 1, 2.

† 2 Pet. iii. 18.

SERMON LIV.

THE EVIL AND DANGER OF FICKLENESS IN RELIGION.

JOSH. xxiv. 15.

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom you will serve : whether the gods which your fathers served, that were on the other side of the flood ; or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell ; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

THE Sovereign disposer of all things, being resolved to destroy the inhabitants of the land of *Canaan* for their impious and barbarous idolatries and unnatural lusts, was pleased to make the *Jews*, who were a much better, though far from a blameless, people, the instruments of their destruction, in order to warn them the more strongly against the like sins. Their leader in this awful work was *Joshua* ; who, after he had accomplished it, divided his conquests amongst them ; and then, having received, from the gratitude of the people, an inheritance in his own tribe, no way considerable, which however was all that he asked* ; appears to have retired thither, and spent the rest of his days in an honourable privacy ; leaving the administration of affairs, in time of peace, to the ordinary civil magistrates : till, finding his end approach, he gathered all *Israel*, and called for their elders, their heads, their judges and their officers† ; and they presented themselves before God. In this solemn assembly, the last he was to see, requesting nothing for himself or his posterity, but strictly following the example of *Moses*, who had in no respect exalted his own descendants above the rest of the people ; he expresses the strongest solicitude for what he knew the public happiness

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* Josh. xix. 49, 50.

† Chap. xxiv. 1.

to depend on; the preservation of true religion, and consequently of virtue, in opposition to the superstitious follies, and shocking vices, of the nations round them. To promote this end, the venerable chief recounts to them, by the especial direction of heaven, the miraculous and gracious dispensations of providence, which their fathers and they had experienced, and he had been so long a constant eye-witness of; concluding the history with their present happy condition: and his inference from the whole is, *now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him, in sincerity and in truth**. But being sensible, that mankind are strangely apt not to think themselves in a good state, when they are in the best; he proceeds to intreat them, that if any are dissatisfied with the fruits of observing their present religion and laws, they would consider well, under what other, upon the whole, they would wish to be; for under some they must. They might, if they pleased, after all he had said, try a change, and take the consequences: but he had seen too much of the benefit of adhering to God, to have the least desire of experiencing what would be the effects of forsaking him: and his prayer and his endeavour should be, that all under his influence might tread, for ever, in the same steps. *If it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you, this day, whom you will serve:—but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

In these words we have,

- I. An intimation of the danger there is, that men may grow weary of true religion.
- II. An admonition, that such would think seriously what they propose to exchange it for: and what advantage they expect from thence.
- III. The resolution, which prudent men will make, whatever others do: to continue in the practice of it themselves: and preserve a conscientious regard to it amongst all that are placed under their inspection.
- I. An intimation of the danger there is, that a great part of the world may grow weary of religion, even whilst it is taught in simplicity and truth.

Undoubtedly one of the strongest prejudices against it hath arisen from the absurd, and often hurtful mixtures, with which,
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* Josh. xxiv. 14.

from time to time, it hath been corrupted, either by mistaken or designing men. These have tempted many to reject the whole, good and bad promiscuously ; without separating what was of God from what was of man. Now, were every thing else to be treated in this manner, not one of the rightest principles of behaviour, or the most valuable blessings of life, could possibly escape. For what is there on earth, that hath not been frequently misunderstood, perverted and abused, both by weakness and wickedness? It is therefore the grossest partiality, not to distinguish in the case of religion, when we do it in every other : indeed, not to be as zealous for every real part of it, (for they are all highly useful) as against the corruptions it hath unhappily undergone. And yet, even in a country where it is the purest, some can allow themselves to talk, as if it were fraud and imposition throughout : can gratify their vanity, defend their vices, or serve their interests, by insisting confidently on the most groundless and exploded objections ; sometimes against all reverence to him who created them ; often against the revelation he hath made to them ; nay, can slight it as intirely, without being acquainted with the shadow of an objection, as if they had the strongest in the world : think it a reason abundantly sufficient, that they see others of good figure do so : and at last, perhaps, set themselves to make it their scorn, without having once considered in earnest, whether they ought not to have made it the rule and comfort of their lives.

This is going great lengths ; yet not absolutely the greatest of all. For it hath happened too commonly, that those very things, for which religion ought to be honoured most, have been the true causes of mens opposing and forsaking it. The *Jews*, for instance, were disgusted with theirs, because it was too spiritual and refined for them. We, indeed, who are blessed with one yet more so, may be tempted to find the contrary fault with that of *Moses*. But think what the worship of the world was at that time : worship of the sun, moon and stars ; brute beasts, stocks and stones ; altars under every green tree, and upon every high hill ; ceremonies numberless, unmeaning, immodest, inhuman. How prodigious a reformation was it then, to introduce, instead of these mischievous absurdities, the adoration of one only invisible being, the maker

of all things ; and the offering of sacrifices to him in one only temple upon earth ; with rites and observances, few in comparison, and directly pointed against idolatry and superstition ! But what was really the merit of their religion, was the ground of their clamour against it : *Make us gods to go before us** ; let us have deities, that we can see and feel, to carry along with us ; was the cry of the people : and whenever they forsook the Lord, it was for these more substantial objects of devotion. This may seem unaccountable enough ; and yet, amongst ourselves, converts are frequently made to a communion, one of whose chief recommendations must be, that it strikes the senses, with images and formalities, pomp and shew.

But, as some are prejudiced against true religion for being too rational ; many, it may be feared, are averse to it for being too moral. As long as piety can be made, in any shape, consistent with sin ; whether by trusting in faith without works, or substituting works of no value for those of real value ; or abounding in some one sort of duties, instead of honestly practising every sort ; so long it may be borne with. But if the teachers of it will assert and prove, and attempt to convince mankind, that no one can be pious, without being uniformly virtuous ; then there remains no possibility of compromising matters : but, if religion will give no quarter to vice, the vicious must give no quarter to religion : a very bad inducement, I own, but a very strong one ; and it deserves careful reflection, whether a principal reason, why christianity is now, more than ever, disregarded, be not this ; that now, more than ever, since the primitive ages, it is so preached, as to leave no room for being godly and wicked at once. But, however this be, there appears, in general, but too much danger, indeed but too much experience, that men may be tired even of true religion ; that it may *seem evil unto them, to serve the Lord their God*. Therefore the text contains,

II. An admonition, that such, as are disposed to throw off the bonds of duty to their Maker, would think seriously, what sort of change they are about to venture upon, and how they hope to be gainers by it.

No other course, that they can take, so much as promises any good with respect to a future state : yet they must own there

* Exod. xxxii. 1,—23.

there may be one: nay, if God be either just, or wise, or good, or true, there will; and if there be, it is the most important interest we have, or can have, to be happy in it: yet nothing, but religion, provides against our being miserable in it. A consideration, which takes little time to express; but very few spend enough in thinking of it; for what are the poor pleasures of this short life, compared with the joys or the pains of eternity? but even as to the present world, how much freedom soever bad men may effect, some master they must serve; some restraints they must be under, and some mortifications they must go through. Consider the pursuits of the selfish and ambitious; are not they obliged to suppress their inclinations, and contradict their passions, in a thousand instances, to carry the single point of their worldly advantage? Consider the indulgences of the voluptuous and intemperate, the sallies and flights of the wild and extravagant: we are apt to say indeed, that they deny themselves nothing: but is it true? Are there not multitudes of things, that all of them wish for, and cannot have: and still greater multitudes, in proportion as they give their wishes a larger scope? Is any possible scheme of life to be carried on, without self-denial in some thing or other? Or, if men can, and will, do just as they please at first; what comes of it? Is it not the perpetual consequence, that they must suffer for it at last; and bear much the heavier burthen, after a time, because they set out with the resolution of bearing none?

If therefore every method, we can pitch on, hath at least, either its restraints, or its sufferings; and probably both: which are most reasonable? which are most beneficial? Those of religion and morals, or those of the various masters, which, on departing from religion and morals, we must obey? It concerns us highly, in such a question, not to flatter ourselves, and take things for granted; nor to guess, and run the risque, but to examine and choose: whereas the misfortune is, men enter upon a course, and follow it their whole lives, without ever deliberately chusing it at all; *balting*, as the prophet expresses it, *between two opinions**, whilst they proceed in one tenor of practice; and that, the wrong one. For the unsafe one is certainly the wrong: and, unless religion cannot be true, neither impiety, nor immorality, can be secure. Whoever therefore allows

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* 1 Kings xviii. 21.

himself in either, ought beforehand to know very certainly, what is impossible to know (for we cannot know things to be true, which are false: first, that nothing remains to be hoped or feared in another life: and then, that wickedness bids fairest for happiness in this.

Too many indeed appear to think the latter point, at least, a very clear one. But remember, the inquiry is not merely, what will afford us most pleasure just at the present; or even for a few years; though it is seldom, that the vicious find reason to applaud their own conduct so long: but what will continue to please, what will give us the advantage upon the whole, taking inward satisfaction into the account, as well as outward gratifications; and not only delight us in the first and smallest part of the journey of life, but support us in the remainder, that needs it most; and enable us to conclude it with comfort and credit. That abandoned wickedness cannot do this, every one, who thinks and observes, must see; and they who do not, will soon feel. Some therefore contrive to take a middle way: indulge themselves beyond virtue, yet restrain themselves short of profligateness. And undoubtedly there would be less guilt in this, if it were not, that being so deliberately guilty is a great aggravation. There may also fewer worldly inconveniences follow from it: but still, if great deviations from duty lead to great mischiefs; the smaller must, in proportion, lead to some. And besides, they who intended to go but a little out of the way, are almost always either invited, or driven, gradually farther and farther: and can never know before-hand, where they shall stop. Indeed what is there to stop them? desires multiply and strengthen. Duty is out of the question. Prudence grows accustomed to submit: perhaps falls low enough, to advise covering one sin with another. What now shall keep such persons back from any crime? A principle of honour, it may possibly be said. And true honour, so far as it goes, is a noble principle indeed. It is uniform virtue, adorned with dignity of manners, with attention to every thing praise-worthy and amiable, and scorn of every thing base and mean; judging what is so, by reason and truth, not vulgar opinion. But the false honour of the vicious is an airy phantom, changeable as fancy and fashion vary, that permits in multitudes of instances, and requires in some, the wickedest,

wickedest, the cruellest, the absurdest behaviour; and sets men up for objects of respect, that have no one good quality, merely because they profess calling to account whoever shall fail of the regard they demand, or ascribe to them any bad quality, which they do not care to own. It can never be, that so wretched a counterfeit as this should be the guide of life. There is therefore none to be trusted to, if virtue be rejected; and virtue, without religion, neither is complete, nor will be effectual. If other superiors and benefactors are intitled to reverence, God is. If outward expressions of reverence are to be shewn them, they are to be shewn him: both to preserve it alive in our own minds, and to spread it around us. And if any expressions of it are due, those which he hath appointed are due. Paying such regard to God, joined with attendance on proper instruction, must naturally produce a serious care, to abstain from every thing injurious, to do every thing beneficial, in human life; as not only our indispensable obligation, but our most important interest. And what other motive can either extend so far, or influence so strongly? If then there be any need, that the world should grow better, or not grow worse; that men should live together innocently and usefully: have comfort under afflictions in this life, or look for eternal blessedness in the next: Principles of piety must be encouraged. Nay, could we possibly be content to give up all these advantages, there would still remain other considerations of great weight on the same side. Though we may throw off religion so far as not to be governed by its precepts: we shall be made, on that very account, from time to time, extremely uneasy by its threatnings: and the consequence of not obeying God as children, will be dreading him as criminals. What if here and there a few profess to have got over these fears? perhaps inwardly they know the contrary: or, however, they come to know it when they least think of it; or, could they be sure never more to experience them on earth, they will too soon feel surer and greater torments in hell, for having thus wickedly hardened their hearts. But mankind in general cannot get over the fear of God. Some religion they must, and will have: and the only question is, whether it shall be a good and true, or a false and bad one. *Joshua* therefore puts the matter to the *Jews* in a perfectly just light: *If it seem evil un-*
to

to you to serve the Lord, choose you whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood; or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell. It is true the Israelites were prone to superstition: we are inclined to profaneness, and therefore may seem in no danger of the opposite extreme. But universal profaneness, and total unbelief, never subsisted long any where, and never will: the world could not bear it: and the human mind hath a natural bent the other way. You have seen this in the case of the Jews. What was that of the Gentiles, when they forsook the truth? That because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; they became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened, till they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man, and birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.*

We of the present age indeed cannot well go thus far at once: but by how easy steps may we come to it! Were not our forefathers near it, but a little more than two hundred years ago; worshipping, with more zeal than they did their Maker, images of pretended saints, many of whom had lived and died great sinners, and addressing prayers to them in a language they did not understand? Now the same high road, that of popery, is open yet. And will not numbers be inclined to take it, if they can be persuaded, from what they see, that the profession of the protestant religion is the direct way to the profession of no religion at all? When public worship and instruction are once deserted, or attended on with visible indifference and contempt; when persons are taught nothing, and guarded against nothing; will they not of course be in danger of every thing? And have we not seducers amongst us in every corner, trained up with the most artful subtlety, to work on the ignorance of some, the guilt of others, the private interest of a third sort; to lead them over unto a communion, that hath corrupted the notions of piety, and weakened the bonds of moral obligation; done infinite mischief to mankind by tyranny, perfidy and cruelty; and must be an eternal foe, whatever it may sometimes pretend, to that happy establishment of truth and liberty, which may God preserve to us and ours?

Whoever

* Rom. i. 21,—24.

Whoever therefore hath a dread of superstition, bigotry and slavery, should be zealous in the highest degree for pure religion, and if ever he would have his zeal effectual, must express it in the same manner, that we find in the

III^d part of the text, the Jewish chief did; by resolving that, *whatever others do, he and his house will serve the Lord.*

Fear of singularity hath a most powerful influence on mankind: and, in matters nearly indifferent, it is very useful that it should. But in points of importance; our concern is, to act as we ought ourselves, let those around us act as they will: take all the innocent care we can, neither to provoke their anger nor contempt; but still do the right thing, and stand by it: preferring the testimony of our own hearts, that we deserve approbation, before receiving from men ever so much of it. But especially in religion, both reason and scripture dictate this behaviour. And yet many, who can even affect to be singular in trifles and follies, have such a cowardly fear of being thought so in the case of seriously professing religion, where it would be truly honourable, and they would in fact be honoured for it, perhaps even by their present acquaintance, or at least by better whom they might chuse, and by the world in general; that, to avoid this imagined evil, they will incur the more real ones, a guilty conscience in this world, and the wrath of their Maker in the next. If this be not contemptible weakness, what is? And if it be, serving the Lord, let ever so few do it, is true wisdom.

But then it must be observed, that, though every degree of genuine regard to God will produce to us proportionable benefits, and preserve us in some degree from sufferings; yet the life and immortality, promised in the gospel, can be attained, and, where it is faithfully preached, eternal punishments can be avoided, only by obedience to the terms proposed in the gospel. The doctrines, therefore, which God hath revealed there, plain or mysterious, must be received with humble faith; the duties he hath enjoined there, moral or positive, must be observed with pious reverence; and our hope of future happiness must be placed, not in the merit, either of our own good works, for without the grace of the Holy Spirit we cannot do any; or of our own repentance, for being sorry that we have sinned

fixed is not being innocent ; but solely in the divine mercy through our Blessed Redeemer, who died for us that we might live to him. And, how much soever these rules may be overlooked or despised in the world, yet he hath repeatedly assured us with uncommon strength of expression, that our *not being ashamed of him and his words*, of which these are part, is an indispensable condition of his not being *ashamed of us at the great day**.

But serving the Lord, as good christians ourselves, is not sufficient, when we are intrusted with others also. Now, in some degree, we are intrusted with all who are placed under our influence, especially if they be under our authority to : and God, with justice, expects every one to do the good, which he hath given him abilities for doing : for, conferring them, is the highest honour he can bestow on his creatures ; and using them, is the noblest way of at once obeying and resembling our Creator. But, not to exceed the limits of domestic life, to which the text points our view : parents are, by nature and scripture, intrusted with their children : bound in conscience to endeavour, that the being, which they have given them, prove not a miserable one : bound in prudence to provide, that when they grow up, they may be a comfort and a credit to them, not a shame and a curse. And yet, how commonly is the ornamental and superficial part of their education the only one attended to ! Perhaps a slight form of catechetical instruction, and a prayer or two are learnt by rote, as a task in their childhood, for mere form's sake, and perhaps not : but, after that, very little care taken in teaching them rules of common prudence ; less still in giving them any consistent principles of morals ; none at all in binding them down to both, by a serious inward sense of religion ; of the purity of God's law ; their depravity, and need of a Redeemer and Sanctifier ; the importance of Christ's ordinances, without which, nothing will be inwardly, or often outwardly, such as it ought : and then, at last, either great surprize and anger is expressed, at their coming out, what it must be expected they should : or else their ruin is stupidly acquiesced in, as unavoidable from the beginning : and men sit down contented, that they who are nearest, and ought to be dearest to them, shall be wicked, and wretched,

* Mark viii. 38.

wretched, and despicable ; or, however they escape here, undone to eternity.

But not only our children should be led to esteem and practise the obligations of piety, but our servants and dependants. We cannot indeed force them to it, and we need not. But we can give them opportunity, and advice, and encouragement : we can remove the obstinately bad, to preserve the rest : we can put the instruction of good books in their way : we can call them to family-devotions, from the lamentable omission of which duty, a very great part of our sins and follies proceeds ; and we can likewise bring some of them at one time, and send the rest at another, to the house of God. It is very true, praying and reading at home, and going to church, are neither the whole nor the main of their duty ; and they will be faithfully told so, when they come here. But these are parts of the first and great commandment, regard to him that made us ; and they are such parts as, if they neglect, they will too easily think they may as well neglect the rest. Most of them would be glad of this kind attention to them ; all of them would respect us for it : and were ever so many of them indifferent about it, or worse, ought it to be an affair indifferent to us ? When poor, ignorant, thoughtless creatures come to live under our roof ; is it christian, is it human, to let them go on, just as they will, to their own destruction of body and soul ? They contribute a great deal to our happiness : why should not we contribute, since we so easily may, in this important point, to theirs ? But indeed, is not our own, present as well as future, deeply concerned in it too ? Our ease, our characters, our fortunes, our lives, depend on the honesty, the veracity, the sobriety, the diligence, of those about us. And what can secure these qualities in them so well, as their being persuaded, that God requires them at their hands, and will treat them, as they treat us ? Were this motive weaker than it is, no real one ought to be despised. Loud complaints of the ill-behaviour of the lower part of the world, are made continually ; but whom have the upper part to thank for it but themselves, if they take no care to prevent or mend it ? With the best care, it will happen too frequently ; but, without it, what else can happen ?

Upon the whole, it is astonishing, that any, who pretend to be good, can fail to endeavour, that their children and servants

may be religious ; when not a few, confessedly bad, take such precautions as they can to make them better than they are willing to be themselves. And undoubtedly this is very prudent, so far as it goes. But, as the prudence of such people is throughout essentially defective, so this instance of it, ordinarily speaking, can go but a very little way. For what likelihood is there, that a few right exhortations, or directions, from the head of a family, will make the members of it modest and sober, just and regular : while his example authorizes them to be lewd and intemperate, unjust and disorderly ? Or that sending them to church will teach them to reverence God ; whilst, perhaps, the table-talk that they hear daily, teaches them to despise him ? Our conduct therefore must be all of a piece ; else we shall neither succeed, nor will it avail us to our own eternal happiness, if we do. But let us first resolve to serve God ourselves ; and then we may insist, that they who belong to us shall, both with a good grace, and good hope of his blessing : to which we cannot acquire a stronger title, than by that method, which procured, as we read in scripture, to the father of the faithful and his descendants, a benediction so distinguished, both temporal and spiritual : *Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that, which he hath spoken of him**.

* Gen. xviii. 18, 19.

SERMON LV.

OF LOVE TO GOD AS THE FIRST AND GREAT COMMANDMENT.

MATT. xxii. 37, 38.

Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

THESE words contain the former part of our blessed Lord's answer to the question, *master, which is the great commandment in the law?* It was put to him by one of the Scribes or lawyers, the authorized instructors of the people, *tempting him*: that is, designing to make trial of his knowledge, and the soundness of his doctrine. For the man's intention plainly appears to have been no worse than this, from his immediate approbation of our Saviour's judgement; and the gracious assurance he received in return, that *he was not far from the kingdom of God*, as we read in the parallel place of St. Mark*.

Which of the commandments is the greatest, may seem to us a question of more curiosity than importance: because undoubtedly the least, as well as the greatest, ought to be observed. Yet still it was a point of some consequence in itself: since two precepts might interfere; and men be obliged to omit one in order to obey the other: now in such cases it was material to know, which they should prefer. But the notions entertained amongst the *Jews* increased the necessity of a right decision of this doubt†. They divided the injunctions of the law, as appears from their books yet remaining, into weighty and

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light

* Mark xii 34. † Vid. Schoetgenii Hor. Heb. & Talm. in loc.

light ones. The former, they held, a man must keep strictly, *if he would enter into life** eternal: but the latter, some of them affirmed, had only a small recompence belonging to them, and that in this world; so that a man might neglect them, one Rabbi saith, *trample upon them*, without much danger. Nay, there were teachers of considerable reputation amongst them, who asserted, that God had given his people so great a number of precepts with this view, that, by observing any one, meaning probably any of the weighty ones, they might obtain salvation†. This was very bad: but their opinions, which were the weighty ones, made it worse yet. Some insisted that these alone were weighty, the transgressors of which, it was expressly threatened in the law, should be cut off; and all the rest light. Some held the third commandment, some the fifth, some the observation of the sabbath, some that of circumcision, to be the weightiest. In our Saviour's time, it seems by the reply which the Scribe made him, that sacrificing was commonly thought the principal article of the law. And indeed, many passages, not only in the gospels, but in the prophets, evidently shew, that the nation in general were fond of exalting the ceremonial precepts above the moral ones, because they found them less disagreeable. In themselves, it must be owned, the former were a heavy yoke, though in their circumstances it had long been a needful one. But to bad men nothing is so heavy, as reforming their hearts and lives. It is true, their sacrifices, and all their observances, rightly interpreted, required this in order to their final acceptance with God. But the outward act being a matter of great form and punctuality, and sometimes expence too, they easily persuaded themselves of what they had a great mind to believe, that a scrupulous performance of such troublesome and shewish duties would certainly be sufficient, whatever their inward dispositions and common behaviour might be. Yet, at the same time, the *Essenes*, no inconsiderable sect amongst them, though affecting privacy, and probably therefore not appearing in the history of the gospels, ran into the contrary extreme: and, professing great sanctity of manners, omitted the temple-sacrifices intirely‡.

In

* Matth. xix. 18. † Pocock on Hof. xiv. 2. cites this from Ikarim, l. iii. c. 29. ‡ Philo, liber quisquis virtuti studet, vol. ii. p. 457. ed. Mang. Joseph. Ant. l. xviii. c. 1.

In such a state of things as this, it was natural to ask the sentiments of so remarkable a teacher as our blessed Lord : and very important, both for the instruction of the people and for his own character, that he should declare them. Undoubtedly he had now a fair opportunity of securing the applause of the multitude and their leaders, by an answer suitable to the notions in vogue ; instead of gaining, as he did, by contradicting them, only the single approbation of one good man. But *for this cause came he into the world, that he should bear witness of the truth** : which yet he did with such prudence, as never to prejudice the least part of it in his zeal for the greatest. When he blamed the Scribes and Pharisees for preferring the minutest of ritual observances to *the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith*, he added immediately, *these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone†*. In the text he proceeds with the same caution : and, well knowing how prone men are to draw false consequences from the truest doctrines, not content with deciding *which was the first and great commandment*, he assures them that the second, a very comprehensive one, was of the same nature and obligation with it : nay, for yet fuller security, subjoins a declaration, that, though to these were subordinate, yet with these were connected, whatever things else the scripture hath required. *Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment‡. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Here then we see the whole system of our duty, standing on its proper foundation, and exhibited to our view in its natural order : beginning with the love of God, proceeding to the love of our fellow creatures, and perfected in a careful attention to every regard of every kind owing to either ; which we cannot pay, without a virtuous government of ourselves.

The love of God is the subject to be explained at present : which I shall do by shewing,

I.

* John xviii. 37. † Matth. xxiii 23. ‡ Aben Ezra saith, the love of God is the root of all the commandments. Buxt. Floril. p. 278.

- I. Its nature.
- II. The importance of it in point of duty.
- III. Its influence on our happiness.
- IV. The methods which infinite wisdom hath employed, to cultivate it in our minds.

I. Its nature.

Various affections cannot fail to arise in our hearts from contemplating the attributes and actions of our Maker. His eternity and presence every where must needs raise in us wonder and astonishment. His unbounded power and knowledge, besides increasing this greatly, must also fill us with apprehensions, that our happiness or misery depends on his conduct towards us. But there is no determinate ground in all this for being either pleased or sorry. If then we consider next, that the same being is perfectly just and righteous, this immediately gives us absolute security, so far as we are innocent; and great comfort, that he, who can do all things, will do only what is equitable. It gives us fear indeed, with reason, in cases where we are conscious, as in multitudes we all are, of ill desert. But such dread, even in the guiltiest of men, must be accompanied with a real, though unwilling, approbation of the character: and the penitent concern of better minds will be attended with reverent esteem. Yet, were we to stop here, our veneration for God would be incomplete, because there still remains a more valuable and engaging quality than any that we have hitherto been ascribing to him. But let us advance one step further: and place before our eyes the universal bounty and mercy of our heavenly Father, proved by the plainest reason, experienced in the works of his creation and the course of his providence; but exercised most fully beyond comparison in the unspeakable blessing of our redemption, and revealed to us most plainly in the declarations of his holy word: then, if our souls have any feeling, there will spring up in them, lively sentiments of complacency, of gratitude, of love. And when once goodness hath made the impression, every other perfection of his nature will both strengthen it inexpressibly, by enabling him to do us continually all possible acts of kindness, and at the same time regulate it duly, by a proper temperature of that awful respect, with which our tenderest affections towards *the high and holy one, that inhabiteth eternity**, ought ever to be intimately mixed.

Such

* Isai. lvii. 15.

Such then is the love of God. And as our sense of the divine excellence cannot be too strong, but must indeed at the best fall infinitely short of what he deserves; we are commanded to love him *with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind*; that is, with the utmost exertion of our inward powers. Not that we are to confine our whole affection to him: for it follows, *thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. Whatever hath any thing amiable in any degree, we ought, as far as we can, to esteem in proportion: and consequently him beyond expression most, who hath in the highest degree possible every thing that can appear amiable to our rational faculties, duly exercised. All objects therefore are to be excluded so far as attachments to them would be inconsistent with devotedness to our Maker. Now the worship of false deities is peculiarly inconsistent with it. And for that reason the love of God, when prescribed to the *Jews* in the Old Testament, is usually explained by adhering to him with conjugal fidelity, (for under that image it is often expressed) in opposition to his rivals, the idols of the nations; and not dividing themselves, as they were extremely apt to do, between *Jehovah* and them. But if, instead of these idols, we *set up* any others *in our hearts**; make unlawful pleasure, power, profit, resentment, our deities; this also is an evident breach of the faith which we have vowed to our sovereign gracious Lord. Nay, if we value the most allowable objects of desire so highly, as to forget or think little of the supreme God, we still incur the same kind of guilt. For we ought to consider whatever we have cause to love best, as bestowed on us by his hand; and therefore as a motive to love him above all, *from whom every good and perfect gift cometh down*†. To say indeed, that we ought to love it in this view only, as coming from him, would be going too far: because, had we been ignorant of God, most things, that deserve our liking now, would in their degree have deserved it then. But still, the more we attend to the goodness of God in every thing, without neglecting the inferior attentions to which he hath bound us, the nearer we approach towards being what we ought.

And further, the more affectionate this regard to him on all occasions is, the better it will suit, not only the words of the commandment, but the dictates of reason itself: which clearly

* Ezek. xiv. 3.

† James i. 17.

ly teaches, that the warmest piety is due to the Author of all our enjoyments. But then it must be observed, however, that love to a being intirely spiritual cannot, ordinarily speaking, raise in us those perceptions of animal fervour, which earthly passions can: nor ought we to esteem ourselves upon them, if we had them. For experience proves, that very bad men may feel at times high raptures of this kind; and very good men may scarce ever feel any thing of them: so much do they depend on constitution. Far therefore from affecting such emotions, when we really have them not; which is a sort of hypocrisy, whether shewn before men, or in the presence of God alone; we ought not to be too earnest in our wishes for them. If he gives them, we are to be thankful: if he with-holds them, it is either for our needful correction, or, perhaps, our true inward improvement. And by labouring to work ourselves up to them, nay, by merely indulging them when our natural frame inclines us powerfully towards them, we may be quite bewildered and lost in unmeaning or injudicious transports, little or nothing akin to that sublime duty, of which they would put on the appearance. But still less ought it to be confounded, as it often hath been, with a blind, or what is worse yet, a bitter vehemence of religious zeal. For the most ardent devotion, so far as it either produces injustice or indifference to our brethren, or proceeds from unworthy conceptions of God, is indeed by no means the love of him, but of a phantom of our own imagination, placed in his stead. And the real and only test of the genuineness and strength of this divine affection in our breasts, is the unvaried constancy of a sincere and reverent delight in the Father and Lord of all, as the perfectest, and best, and most beneficent of beings; expressed in humble and hearty praise and thanksgiving, in a studious imitation of him, and a chearful obedience to him.

The next thing to be laid before you is,

II. The importance of cherishing and acting from this principle, in point of duty.

Most people seem to think, that what they are pleased to call moral behaviour, though perhaps in some points grossly immoral, is their whole duty. Others, who have some notion of piety, carry it little further than attending public worship, more or less frequently, perhaps with very little thought of what

what they are about. Some, who make a conscience of private prayer also, it may be doubted, neither feel, nor endeavour to feel, much of the good things they say in it. Or, whatever sense a few may have of the fear of God, they have usually none almost of love to him. Any real experience of that affection, they have heard so often treated, even by professedly serious christians, as mere enthusiasm, that they are apprehensive of danger from it. The scripture doth indeed enjoin it: and so they will bear with the mention of it in discourses from the pulpit, provided it be passed over slightly, or interpreted away to just nothing: else they conceive it to be at best intirely supererogation; and leave it accordingly with all their hearts to such as chuse to have more religion than they need.

And, it must be confessed, this way of thinking hath received too much countenance from the indiscreet and extravagant manner in which the subject hath been sometimes handled. But surely, explained as you have heard it now, there can be nothing more reasonable, or of greater moment. If we have any principle of goodness in ourselves, that must lead us to esteem and love it in others. Now in God is perfect goodness: and therefore not to esteem and love him, is to be void of right affection towards that being who deserves it infinitely the most. Our duty consists in such behaviour as the relations of things require of us. To whom then are our first and most important relations? Are they not evidently to our Maker, preserver, and gracious benefactor, to our sovereign Lord, and final judge? Other claims, however like in their nature, must be unspeakably inferior in their degree to his. What sort of morality then is that, which dwells only on the transitory obligations of men one to another, and overlooks the eternal bonds, which tie us, *so long as we have our being**, to him, *of whom, and through whom, and to whom, are all things†*? The regards that we owe him, indeed, are numerous; and vary in some measure as our spiritual state doth. But still, as goodness, though combined with other attributes, was in the beginning the active principle in the mind of God, and ever prevails through all his dispensations: so is love, though occasionally associated with other movements of soul, the original and uni-

* Ps. civ. 33.

† Rom. xi. 36.

versal affection, due to him from all his rational creatures : or, in our Saviour's words, *the first and great commandment.*

Suppose, in the mutual intercourses of this world, any one should value, as he ought, a person of but low desert ; and yet be insensible to much higher merit, well known to him, in another ; should be duly grateful to the former for favours, not worth naming in comparison with those which the latter had done him, and yet should leave him and all his kindness out of his thoughts : would not such a turn of mind be very wrong and criminal ? Would not such an excellent and beneficent person be very unequally and unjustly treated ? Yet this is exactly the common behaviour of mankind. Here we live amongst poor imperfect creatures, like ourselves. We receive a few small benefits from some of them, and see a little glimmering of goodness in others ; and should be very blameable, if we did not feel and express a proper esteem for them, on account of both. Now there is at the same time, not only within our knowledge, but ever most intimately present with us, a being of inconceivable perfection and loveliness ; from whose bounty we and this whole universe have received our very existence, and every capacity of enjoyment that belongs to it ; by whose continual support we are upheld in life ; whose grace excites us to every thing good ; whose forbearance passes over our daily transgressions ; nay, *who hath commended his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ, his only Son, died for us, that, being justified by his blood, we might be saved from wrath**, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God†. What then have we cause to think of ourselves, if we love not him, who himself is love‡ ; if such acts of kindness make none or faint impressions on our hearts ; if we reflect but seldom upon them, and are influenced but little by them ? Is there, or can there be, an instance of ingratitude from man to man, that bears the least proportion to the unworthiness of such a temper ? For that God hath no need of our acknowledgments, as our fellow-creatures often have, only proves his goodness to be the greater ; and therefore ought not surely to make our sense of it the less. Now, if these things are thus evident to our view, in how much stronger a light must they appear to his

* Rom. v. 8, 9.

† Ver. 2.

‡ 1 John iv. 8.

his all-seeing eye? And with what dislike and indignation must he look on so shocking a depravity, as that of refusing him the very affection, which he purposely and principally formed us to exercise towards himself, its most deserving, its only adequate object? For, as all that in a moral sense is good in his whole creation, is but the shadow of divine perfection; so the esteem and love of what is good must ever be essentially defective, till it leads us to, and terminates in the love of him.

But let us now consider also the effects of this principle on other parts of our duty. We must set our hearts on something. Worldly things are all of them trifles. Many of them are not to be attained, but by unlawful means: however attained, fondness for them debases and corrupts us. We see and feel it every day; all the wickedness that prevails on earth springs from it. Therefore, to avoid this danger, men have been directed to fix their attention on the rightness, the amiableness of virtue: and right and amiable it is, no question. But, without having recourse to unhappy experience, the plainest reason shews, how weakly and how transiently the bare idea, the abstract notion, of moral excellence must affect such creatures, surrounded with such temptations as we are, compared with an affectionate regard to him, in whom the fulness of it dwells, and overflows on all the works of his hands. Every sort, indeed, of regard to God, is a more powerful incitement to virtue, than any other motive: but love hath a peculiar force; often in beginning a change from evil to good, but always in carrying it on, and completing it. While we obey only from fear of him, we are unwilling and backward, imagine difficulties, contrive excuses; and think it a point gained, if we can persuade ourselves, that this or that needs not to be done. If hope be added to it, without any inducement more generous, we shall still be in danger of aiming to get our reward by doing as little for it as we can. But those, whom we love, we serve with alacrity and zeal; forget our own inclinations to adopt theirs, hate every thing that displeases them, despise every thing that doth not recommend us to them, look on their commands as favours and honours, rejoice to encounter difficulties for their sakes, and think we can never do enough to testify our attachment to them. What noble improvements then must

love to God make in the performance of our duty; and how can it fail,

III. Of increasing our happiness, even in this world, as well as the next?

For want of cultivating this delightful affection, the thoughts of him are dreadful to the generality of men. Too many are tempted to wish in their hearts, if they durst, that he were not, or had no regard to human conduct: and if any of them can but persuade themselves for a while, on the strength of some poor cavil, to hope what they wish, they triumph in the imagined discovery, that sets them so much at ease. From the same default, humbler and righter minds consider him very often in no better light, than as a rigid lawgiver, arbitrarily exacting a number of almost impracticable duties, and enforcing them with the dread of insupportable punishments: whence they are ready to sink under the terrors of religion, even while they are conscientiously fulfilling its precepts. Looking on God as the object of love would rectify these mistaken conceptions intirely. We should all see and feel, that a being of infinite goodness, directed by infinite wisdom, is the highest blessing; and the want of such a one would be the greatest calamity, that is possible: we should be satisfied, that the strictest of his laws, and the severest of their sanctions, are means which he knows to be needful for our good; that his mercy will forgive on repentance our past transgressions of them, that his grace will strengthen us to keep them better, and that he will never reject a soul affectionately devoted to him. In proportion then as we are so, all terrifying apprehensions will vanish from us. *There is no fear in love, saith St. John; fear hath torment; but perfect love, casteth out fear*.*

Another sort of men there is, who have not much uneasiness, but little or no pleasure in religion. What they call performing their devotions, is commonly nothing more than going heavily through a few customary shews of respect, and repeating by rote a certain number of good words, without any life, or almost any meaning. No wonder, if the benefit of such worship seems to be so small, that more than a few, whose consciences would not suffer them to neglect it, cannot however help

* 1 John iv. 18.

help considering it as a burthensome task, enjoined them, they scarce know why. But were these forms and shadows turned into substance, by the real exercise of that devout affection which is professed in them, we should none of us any longer think hardly or meanly of the highest and happiest employment of the human soul. We should be filled with pleasing reverence in doing homage to the gracious Lord of all, celebrate his perfections as interested in every one of them, give ease to our hearts by a penitent confession of our offences, make our claim to his promised mercy with most joyful gratitude, vow to him chearfully a more vigilant obedience, feel a double satisfaction in every comfort from having received it as his gift, and disburthen ourselves of every anxiety, by committing to his providence all our wants, and all our cares.

Every other love may cause the acutest misery. The object of our tenderest earthly regards may be insensible or ungrateful; may prove many ways inferior to our expectation; may be wretched, and make us so; may be snatched away on a sudden for ever. But love to God is subject to no disappointment; is indeed a cure for all that can possibly happen to us. While we *set our affection on things above**, the chief treasure of our soul must ever be safe: even *those things*, that seem to be the most *against us†*, we are expressly assured, are *working together* all the while *for our good‡*: and the more of our inferior enjoyments God requires us to sacrifice to him, the fuller opportunities he gives us of manifesting that supreme value for him, which he seldom fails to reward amply here, by infusing into us a sense of his favour, greatly superior to all worldly pleasure; but at least *he hath prepared* in heaven *for them that love him, things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man§*.

Indeed, how large a part, that love itself, which we have preserved inviolate through the trials of life, will then make of our felicity; when we shall be raised above all our present low objects of desire, and have every faculty of our souls adapted to embrace the only worthy one; when we shall experience his immediate beatific presence, feel joys unutterable, flowing directly from him, and be compleatly assured, that *this God is our God for ever and ever †*; how transporting the movements

* Col. iii. 2. † Gen. xlii. 35. ‡ Rom. viii. 28.

§ 1 Cor. ii. 9. ¶ Ps. xlviii. 14.

ments of our affections towards him may then become, is not for us now to say or conceive. But so much apprehension of it we must surely have, as will shew that our most important interest lies in forming ourselves to that disposition of heart towards him in this life, which is necessary to our blessedness in the next. For the principal felicity of heaven consists in God: and unless we love him, we cannot enjoy him, or be happy with him.

Let us therefore proceed to consider,

IV. The methods which infinite wisdom hath taken to cultivate so excellent a principle in our minds.

Love owes its being to goodness; and so may be produced, either by a general contemplation of its amiableness, or by favours personally received from it. That we are capable of the former and purer sort of love, delight in a benevolent character, though we have never been benefited by it, nor possibly can be, is a truth of which every day gives proofs with respect to our fellow-creatures, whom we affectionately esteem, though inaccessiblely distant from us, though dead many ages before us. And therefore we are doubtless capable also of admiring and adoring the infinitely superior benevolence of our Creator, abstracted from the thought of our own sharing in it; as indeed we surely all of us love him for his bounty to the rest of the world, as well as to ourselves. But then, this mere disinterested affection, though natural to our hearts, is very weak and languid there, in the midst of so many other passions and appetites, as our condition upon earth makes necessary for us, and the original depravity and superadded evil customs of mankind have so unhappily strengthened and perverted. Our hearts are pre-engaged and filled up, for the most part, with temporal, it is well if not with criminal, objects of desire, long before we come seriously to reflect on the spiritual and truly valuable one. Nor, when we do, can mere speculative meditation upon that be expected to prevail over the importunate calls which we have to other attentions: but experience of his bounty must be added, to invigorate esteem by gratitude. And plentifully it is added by our heavenly Father in his works of nature and of grace. *O that men would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness, and declare the wonders which he doth for*

for the children of men * ; that *they would love him, because he first loved us* † ! But benefits received are soon forgotten : and whatever thankful warmth they may raise, while the relish of them is fresh and lively, cools and flattens ; till, by long possession, we grow apt to think every thing that we enjoy our due ; and feel nothing in relation to it but discontent, if any part is taken away or diminished. Knowing this, our indulgent Maker, that he may attract us more powerfully to himself, hath joined with the experience of present mercies, the hope of unspeakably greater to come : and *blessed is he whose hope is in the Lord his God* ‡ . For though it be a less noble, because more selfish, passion, yet, in the present case, it partakes considerably of something moral and religious. Any real desire of heavenly bliss must imply a degree of love, both to virtue and holiness, in which it will chiefly consist, and to that holy being who hath promised to bestow it. But alas ! worldly and sinful attachments debase mens natures, that they cannot aspire to, cannot earnestly wish for, any thing great and excellent. And therefore the wise ruler of the world hath enforced his laws by the only remaining motive, fear : that they, whom nothing better will influence, may at least be influenced by considering the present sufferings and future misery, awaiting wickedness : a low and slavish inducement, it must be owned : but however so far a good sign in him who acts upon it, as it shews him not to be inflexibly obstinate in what is evil. And, remote as it may seem from that generous flame which our Maker seeks to kindle in our breasts, yet the son of *Sirach* hath justly observed, that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of his love* § .

Fear, in the first place, can with peculiar efficacy restrain the outward actions of men, and keep them from adding strength to bad inclinations by indulgence. Fear, especially of punishment which they know they deserve, can make their vices become tasteless and unpleasant to them. And when once they are brought to avoid forbidden gratifications as hurtful, there is a fair prospect, that not only virtuous behaviour will recommend itself, as almost every thing doth, by custom, but

* Ps. cvii. 21.

† 1 John iv. 19.

‡ Ps. cxlvi. 4.

§ Ecclus xxv. 12. See Philo de Abrahamo, p. 19 ed. Mangey : and a large Quotation from Maimonides, in Humphrey's Diss. on the Resurrection, prefixed to this translation of Athenagoras, p. 52, &c.

but that also its intrinsic fitness and beauty will come to be perceived, and awaken suitable affections. Or, if this be already the case, and yet vehement temptations hurry men on to sin; (a very common and very pitiable condition) fear may be so impressed on the heart from above, as to overbalance these; free the rational principle from the oppression under which it labours, and enable it to resume its rightful dominion. Then the conduct will be reformed, the view of things gradually brighten, and the more ingenuous affections of hope and gratitude, and unmixed love, spring up and flourish; till at length our duty and our Maker, which at first we regarded unwillingly, on mere compulsion, will no longer have need of any other force than their own native attraction, to regulate every thought of our souls, and every action of our lives.

Thus then appears the wisdom and the goodness of those various methods which God hath taken to unite us finally to himself. He hath planted in our hearts that pure and disinterested esteem and love of moral perfection, which leads directly to the esteem and love of him above all; and without which we should not have been susceptible of genuine piety and virtue. But having placed us, with a nature prone to go wrong, in a world full of inticements, he hath not left us to the guidance of this one principle, which, though the best in itself, would have proved insufficient for our direction; but hath kindly put us under the tutorage of subordinate affections, *to train us up in the way wherein we should go* *, till we become enlightened enough *to approve the things that are excellent* †, and animated enough to pursue them for their own sakes. Let us therefore give up ourselves without scruple to the influence of every motive to our duty, which reason or scripture sets before us, of pleasure or terror, of this world or the next, and by reading, meditation and prayer, imprint them strongly on our minds: nor be at all dejected, though perhaps as yet the least worthy of them hath the largest share in our obedience; as probably it hath for a time in that which most children pay to their earthly parents, for whose persons and precepts, notwithstanding, they acquire, by insensible steps, the most dutiful and tender esteem. But whoever would strengthen within himself this blessed disposition towards God, must

* Prov. xxii. 6.

† Phil. i. 10.

must frequently recollect and inculcate the conviction, that other incitements are but the means, and *love the end of the commandment* * : that we improve and grow inwardly better under the heavenly discipline, only in proportion as we advance in unfeigned affection, and are transformed by it into real likeness to the supreme good. Open your hearts therefore to feel his goodness towards yourselves, and imitate it towards your brethren. *For God is love ; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him* †.

* 1 Tim. i. 5.

† 1 John iv. 16

S E R M O N LVI.

OF THE LOVE OF OUR NEIGHBOUR.

MATTH. xxii. 39.

And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

THIS is the latter part of our Saviour's answer to the question, *which is the great commandment in the law?* He had already answered sufficiently, by saying, it was the love of God. But most of the *Jews*, before whom he spoke, thought the best proof of their fulfilling that duty, was a scrupulous exactness in some, or all, of the ceremonial precepts that God had enjoined them. And on the merit of this, they indulged themselves in great hardness of heart, even towards their brethren of the same religion; and in utter disregard, if not implacable hatred, of all who were of a different religion, perhaps of a different sect only. So that, if he had carried his reply no further, his hearers, *who had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge**, would in all probability have understood him according to their own preconceived notions: and never have suspected him of designing to condemn their superstition and uncharitableness. Therefore he immediately subjoins, from the express words of *Moses*†, another commandment, which, if they misinterpreted the first, might shew them their mistake; and if they did not, would plainly appear, to any considerate person, *like unto it* in its nature, and second in its dignity and use: *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. But this also the *Jews* contrived to explain in a wrong manner, that they might gratify wrong inclinations. For which reason he took an opportunity to set them right. And, besides the *Jews*,

* Rom. x. 2.

† Lev. xix. 18.

multitudes of others, both before and ever since, have done the same thing. Nay some, not content with perverting, and so disobeying, have directly found fault with it.

Yet whoever believes in a wise and good ruler of the world, must believe it to be his will, that humanity should be practised amongst men: and whoever feels in himself kind affections, must think the exercise of them his duty. But then doubts are raised, who are entitled to our kindness, and in what degree: both which points therefore the precept, now before us, briefly determines. And I shall explain and vindicate its determinations, by shewing you the meaning, *first*, of the word *neighbour*; *secondly*, of the expression, *loving him as ourselves*: and proving in some measure all the way, but principally at the conclusion, the reasonableness and necessity of having so much regard for so many as the text requires.

I. Our *neighbour* then commonly signifies in scripture, and not seldom in heathen writers, every person who is placed within our reach and influence. Accordingly St. Paul, instead of saying, he that loveth his neighbour, saith, *he that loveth another, hath fulfilled the law**. We have usually the most frequent opportunities of doing good to those who live with us, or near us. But if any one, however distant from us, or unknown to us, particularly wants our help, he is, in effect, by that very thing, brought near us for the time, and put under our care. God's benevolence is absolutely universal: ours should be extended as far as it can: and the extent of mens power being extremely various and uncertain; (for the meanest subject may sometimes, by one single discovery, do more general service to mankind, than the greatest monarch is capable of) the word *neighbour* hath this peculiar advantage, and therefore propriety, that it contracts or enlarges its signification, just as the case demands; and either takes in the extremities of the globe, or confines itself to our own home.

Some have carried their public-spiritedness too far: and piqued themselves on manifesting good-will to their fellow-creatures, by undertakings out of their province, and even beyond their abilities; while their proper neighbours, those with whom they had close connections, and their proper business, that which their circumstances bound them to mind, were disregarded: an injudicious conduct, when it proceeds from the

* Rom. xiii 8.

best intentions ; but highly blameable, if vanity, or a meddling temper, be the source of it : on which head these persons would do well to examine themselves. But the far more ordinary fault is the opposite one : narrowing the bounds of our friendly dispositions ; and excluding those from the benefit of being our neighbours, who have a right to it.

The principal causes of this are three : Hatred, pride and selfishness.

1. One chief ground of hatred long hath been, and is, diversity of faith or worship : of which case we have a most remarkable instance, *Luke x. 25, &c.* There a certain lawyer standing up, and tempting our Saviour with the question, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life ?* he draws from his own mouth the answer, *thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbour as thyself* : then tells him, *thou hast answered right : this do, and thou shalt live.* But he, willing, as the evangelist observes, *to justify himself, said unto Jesus, and who is my neighbour ?* imagining, no doubt, as the sequel shewed, and as most of his countrymen thought at that time, and many ages after*, if they do not still, that none but the members of his own communion deserved the name ; and that all others were to be deemed unrelated to him, and held in abhorrence. This abominable notion our blessed Lord might have confuted by numerous passages of the Old Testament† : but he thought it more useful to humble the vain man, by convicting him from the testimony of his conscience, and making him confess, without perceiving it, how unjust his interpretation was. For this end he tells him the moving story, that you all know, of the *Jew* and the *Samaritan* ; of which two nations the former detested the latter beyond all others : and having easily brought him to declare, that the Samaritan had acted the neighbourly part, as he ought, to the Jew ; it evidently followed, that a *Jew*, upon occasion, should act the same part to a *Samaritan*. *Which thinkest thou was neighbour to him that fell amongst the thieves ? And he said, he that shewed mercy on him.* Then said Jesus unto him, *go and do thou likewise.* O that all christians of all denominations had learned, or would yet learn, from hence and from the whole tenour of the gospel, what some of them in particular are lamentably ignorant of, or worse : that kindness and tenderness, and much more justice and equity, are due to those of every sect and party,

* See Lightfoot's Harm. of New Test. and on this history.

† Exod. xxii. 26. xxiii. 9. Lev. xix. 33, 34. Deut. x. 19. &c.

party, from whom they differ the most widely ; and due, as a condition of their *inheriting eternal life* !

Another thing, which often withholds our kind regard from very fit objects of it, and excites hatred to them, is rivalry in profit, advancement, affection, reputation. And we may see in the world, perhaps feel in ourselves, if we examine, as we every one should, that competitions, not only about matters of some weight, but the merest trifles, can turn the best neighbours, the nearest relations, the dearest friends, into absolute strangers, if not bitter enemies. Nay, the bare success of others, where we neither were nor could be their competitors, is enough sometimes to alienate our hearts from them to a strange degree. Yet surely we ought not to be hated by others, either for aiming at, or obtaining advantages, by any fair means : nor consequently they by us. Nay, should they, in such a case, thwart an important interest of ours, to secure an inconsiderable one of their own : even this, though a sad defect of generosity, may in strictness of speech be no injustice.

But further, supposing a man hath directly done us a palpable injury, still he is our neighbour. Perhaps it was ignorantly, or inadvertently, or from such frailty as we and all men are liable to : or it is but a slight or a single offence : or we had provoked him to it ; or received favours from him, that overbalance it : or he hath good qualities in other respects, that intitle him to our esteem. Or if he be, on the whole, wicked : yet possibly he is not incorrigible. While we are too much offended to bear with him, our heavenly Father, whom he hath much more offended, bears with him ; and is graciously trying all methods to reclaim him. You will say, " God cannot be hurt by his wickedness." Why, neither need you. By patience, you may always turn it to your spiritual improvement : by prudence, you may generally avoid any temporal harm from it. You may, if it be necessary, punish him for it : yet consider him as one whom you could heartily wish to treat more gently.

2. The same bad effect, that resentment hath on some, pride alone hath on others : they cannot allow such low creatures, as the multitude are, to claim their notice, and even their love, by a presumptuous name, which implies a sort of equality with them. But indeed, they are not only our neighbours,

bours, but our brethren: for God *hath made of one blood all that dwell on the face of the earth**. They have the same principles of human nature, the same rights of human society, the same protection of divine providence here, the same covenant of eternal glory hereafter. And if we cannot, for the sake of these things, overlook the contemptibleness of their outward appearance, and treat them with compassion and beneficence, instead of scorn; we are much meaner wretches than great numbers of them.

3. A third inducement to deny others a claim to our neighbourly regard is selfishness: a worse turn of mind, on some accounts, than either of the former. A man's anger and pride can affect but part of his neighbours, usually a small one: to the rest he may still be friendly and beneficent. But the selfish man acknowledges no neighbour: is concerned solely for himself, and what he is pleased to reckon his own interest; which he places in wealth or rank, power or pleasure. And they who seek wealth only by excessive frugality, are generally disliked rather more than they deserve. But such as enrich or advance themselves by the wickedest rapaciousness and baseness, provided they live splendidly and expensively, are considered with an indulgence, that hath extremely pernicious fruits. And the most abandoned pursuers of immoral pleasure obtain, by their shewish gaiety, the character of the best natured people imaginable: though they often have originally, and seldom fail to acquire, the most absolute insensibility to public welfare, the ties of hospitality and friendship, the distresses of families, and even of the unhappy creatures who have believed their professions of the tenderest sentiments.

But next in guilt to such as mind none but themselves, is he, that fixes upon one, or some few, relations or favourites, for the objects of his whole affection: a fault the more dangerous, as possibly it may appear to him a virtue. He is doing his share of good: taking care of those, who naturally, or by a sort of adoption, belong to him. And doubtless we are peculiarly intrusted with such: but not authorized either to injure or neglect others for the sake of exalting these to a height that is needless, and perhaps hurtful even to themselves. Kindness of heart was planted in men, not to divide the world into little parties, each of which should keep separate from and be zealous against the rest; but to unite all, as
much

much as could be, into one neighbourhood, indeed one body, animated with one soul. It is not for our family, or our friends alone, that God is concerned, or would have us concerned: but universal good is his end, and universal goodwill is the great instrument which he hath given us to promote it. Therefore we must always bear in mind the common relation of man to man: and, whenever it is doubtful whether that, or the particular ties of blood or intimacy require the preference, far from following the strongest propensity blindfold, we should labour to preserve the sincerest impartiality in forming our judgement: for that and that only will effectually plead our excuse, if we err, as without question we often do:

Having now seen the scriptural and rational extent of the phrase, *thy neighbour*, let us consider,

II. What, and how necessary, that love is, which the commandment in the text enjoins us to bear him. This, I hope, hath appeared already in some measure: but must be shewn more distinctly, because too many object, that they cannot help hating some persons, and see no cause to love many others.

Now, it should be considered, we have two sorts of love: one of esteem, founded on the opinion that men are deserving; the other, of mere benevolence, founded on the knowledge that they are capable of pleasure and pain. The former we may justly be expected to have for all we can: the latter, for all absolutely. There are people in the world, for whom we cannot well have much esteem. Yet every one hath some valuable qualities. Those whom we dislike, it is great odds, have more than we allow them: possibly, were it not for our passions and prejudices, we should find several of them to be highly worthy and amiable. And, though we are not always obliged to be acquainted with their merit, we are obliged not to detract from it. But, whatever ground we may have to think ill of them, nothing hinders us from wishing well to them. If they are bad, is there not great need of wishing they were better? Continuing such as they are, is it not reasonable to wish them every enjoyment, that will do no harm to them or others? Do they not often in this world, and will they not certainly in the next, pay dearly enough for their wickedness? And is it not the part of humanity then to exercise pity towards them; and leave vengeance to him whose it is?

“ But

“ But they are our enemies: is that a title to our love?” No, certainly. You are not commanded to love them because they are your enemies, or the more for being so: but only, in a due measure, notwithstanding they are your enemies. Perhaps indeed they are not so: at least, to near the degree that you imagine. But if they were: hath not God loved us, and sent his Son to die for us, *when we were enemies**? Hath he not abundant right to expect this return from us? doth he not expressly tell us, he expects it: Hath he not planted a natural principle of relenting and forgiveness in us? And is he not ready to assist us continually, by his grace, in the revival and cultivation of it?

But you will say, “ Even to our enemies we will do no wrong: should a proper occasion offer, we will do them service: and then, how can it signify any thing, what our affections to them are!” Why, you may profess to behave thus, without loving them at all; and you may possibly design it: but you will not keep up to it. Such as your affections are, such will your actions be: and endeavouring to restrain the latter, without amending the former, you will find, is continual uneasiness, and much labour, to little purpose. Rectifying your inward disposition is going to the root of the matter. To think of your neighbour with mildness and candour, and therefore behave to him with equity and kindness, is a plain way. But when you pretend never to do him harm, though you always wish it him; and to be ready to promote his happiness, while you desire his misery: either you are not in earnest, or you do not know yourself; it is too hard for human strength. So that in this, indeed, in every instance, where christianity may seem to have made our duty more difficult, by enjoining the reformation of our hearts as well as our lives, it hath on the contrary made it practicable and easy, by putting us in the only true method. Besides, regulating the one, without the other, if we could do it, would be utterly insufficient to answer our Maker’s great end, the purifying of our natures, and exalting us to a capacity of heavenly bliss. The affections, in the moral sense, are the man. And if you give up to God your outward actions only, your sacrifice is defective and unacceptable. You will plead, it may be, that to him you give up your
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* Rom. v. 10.

whole soul: for you love God intirely, though you hate bad men. But loving them, is one main proof which he requires of your loving him. If you loved, you would obey, you would imitate him. And therefore St. *John* declares, *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar**.

Observe also, that as your love to your brethren must be inward and sincere, so it must have in view, not merely their present gratification, but their lasting benefit, even in opposition to that; and not merely their welfare in this world, but in the next too. For never was there surely a more dreadful abuse of words, than to call that good-nature, which complacently allows acquaintance, dependants, friends, relations ever so near, to go on unmolested to ruin, here and hereafter: nay, too often, directly invites and leads them to it. The scripture, in prohibiting this behaviour, gives it the opposite name, and very justly. *Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him*†. Whence, take notice again, that mere desire of good to another, when more is in our power, will by no means be sufficient. Love is an active principle: and if we stop short, be it through penuriousness, or be it through indolence, contented with only wishing well to those, whom with moderate pains and expence we might actually serve; it is leaving that affection to spend itself in doing nothing, unless it be cheating us with an imagination of our being better than we are, which God hath commanded us to cherish and exert for the noblest purposes.

But admitting, that we are to *love our neighbour* in this manner, still doth not the command of loving him *as ourselves*, extend to something impossible? Certainly not. For we meet with several instances of persons being said to love others *as their own souls*, or themselves, both in the sacred† and profane writers‡: and we are to understand the phrase agreeably

VOL. II.

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to

* 1 John iv. 20. † Lev. xix. 17. ‡ Deut. xiii. 6. 1 Sam. xviii. 3. xx. 17.

§ In quibus enim eadem studia sunt, eademque voluntates, in his sit, ut æque quisque altero delectetur, ac se ipso: efficiturque id, quod Pythagoras ultimum in amicitia putavit, ut unus fiat ex pluribus. Cic. Off. i. 17. Ex quo perspicitur, cum hanc benevolentiam late longèque diffusam vir sapiens in aliquem pari virtute præditum contulerit, tum illud effici quod quibusdam incredibile videatur, sit autem necessarium, ut nihil sese plus quam alterum diligat. Quid enim est quod differat,

to their meaning; not to stretch it farther than they can mean. In scripture, at least, it doth not denote the very highest affection that we are capable of. For the duty of loving God is plainly designed to be expressed in stronger terms, than that of loving our neighbour. Yet the latter must imply, not only good-will as real as we bear to ourselves; for, if it be inconsiderable, it will be ineffectual: but also a large degree of good-will; for that also we bear to ourselves. And farther, we are to love him in proportion as we love ourselves: to pay a more attentive regard to his interests, the more powerfully we are addicted by nature or custom to regard our own; and so preserve the balance of our affections in due poise. This, however, we shall do much better, if we also take the expression, as we justly may, to comprehend an injunction, that we love and consider our neighbour just as much as we should love and consider ourselves, were we in his case. For, though we be equally affected by his circumstances and our own, so far as we can know and feel both, this will carry us no unfit lengths in his favour: because we cannot know and feel both in the same degree; and, though we could, no harm would follow. Indeed we are sometimes bound, in the practical sense, to love our neighbour more than ourselves: to shew a greater concern for his good, not only than we do shew for our own; for which, God knows, in the principal points, we often shew none at all; but than we ought to shew for our own: because a very important advantage of his may be in question; and a small one, in comparison, of ours; which it would be meanness not to slight: or the advantage of many may be in one scale, and our own singly in the other. Now, when that happens, we may be obliged to go so far as to *lay down our lives for our brethren**; not only for their eternal, but temporal welfare. Still, unquestionably, in all cases that but approach towards an equality, we act allowably in preferring ourselves, where no obligation of justice or truth exacts the contrary. And, in the endless variety of circumstances that occur in human life, all that could be done by precept, at least by any one short

cum sint cuncta paria? Cic. de Leg. i. 12. where see more. But he requires this degree of love not to every man, but between perfectly wise and good men. The doctrine of the Epicureans was, *nullo modo possumus amicitiam tueri, nisi æque amicos & nos ipsos diligamus.* Cic. de Fin. i. 20. where see more.

* 1 John iii. 16.

short precept, and such mankind must have, was to give as awakening a caution as possible against the greatest danger, and as clear a direction as possible how to avoid it; which, I hope, you are sensible, the precept before us hath done; and then to leave both right and wrong minds to shew what they are: the one, by cheerfully taking, and diligently seeking, if there be need, fit opportunities of doing acts of humanity; the other, by raising scruples, inventing evasions, and neglecting the plainest calls, because some are doubtful.

Men may indeed be too prone to follow every good-natured impulse. And the few who have cause to suspect they are, should consider what they owe to themselves, and to other demands upon them, present, or probably future, as well as to the object which now strikes them: they should ask the judgement of pious and prudent friends: they should have some regard to the judgement even of the less good part of the world; else they may possibly discredit the duty which they would wish to recommend. But giving ourselves up to be influenced solely or chiefly by common opinion and practice, is the way to extinguish every thing that is right in us. To a proper degree therefore the son of *Sirach's* advice is necessary to be observed: *In every good work trust thy own soul, for this is the keeping of the commandment**. Upright meaning, with a moderate share of discretion, will be a safe guide through whatever perplexities may at any time arise in relation to this precept.

Still you will say, perhaps, that, explain and limit it as we will, it is very hard after all, that, in order to obey God, and demonstrate our love to him, we must disobey the dictates of the strongest and usefulest principle he hath planted in our nature, the love of ourselves, and adopt others, often of very undeserving characters in our own room. But consider: self-love is not happiness; it is not always the instrument of procuring happiness; but makes us uneasy and wretched. It can procure happiness no otherwise than by exciting us to gratify our natural inclinations, when that will do us good; and restraining us from gratifying them, when it would do us harm. Now love to our fellow-creatures is one of our natural inclinations. We all feel and shew it to be so, in some instances,

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* Eccl. xxxii. 23.

instances, more or less. And why is not the indulgence of it, within the bounds now prescribed, as likely to do us much good and little harm, as that of any other? It is a pleasing movement of mind in itself. Reflection upon it affords a second pleasure. We approve and esteem ourselves for having it, and for attempting what it prompts us to. If we succeed, we have exquisite joy: if we fail, it is no inconsiderable comfort, that we meant well. And, ordinarily speaking, all around us commend and applaud us for it. By these means our goodness often brings us great worldly advantages: and very often is attended with no worldly disadvantage. For there are many and daily ways of exercising it without expence or trouble. And if the rest do cost us something, perhaps we can well bear it, and not be at all the worse. But, were it more, do our indulgences of other inclinations cost us nothing? Do not the debaucheries, the resentments, the amusements, the vanities, the caprices of men, interfere much more frequently and irreconcilably with the truest and nearest even of their temporal interests, than the love of their neighbour doeth? "But these things, you will say, give much higher delight." Perhaps not. For multitudes pursue with strange eagerness what yields them very little satisfaction. At best, it is a very unwise delight. And possibly you are pleased with your present objects of desire, only because you have set yourselves to be pleased with them. Set yourselves therefore to be pleased with promoting the welfare of others: and you will find your account in it, beyond any thing in this world.

Indeed almost all the misery of this world proceeds from the want of it. The unavoidable evils of life are nothing to those which we bring upon one another voluntarily, by ill-nature, insensibility and heedless disregard. These are the heavy sufferings, that every one complains of and groans under, and always must, if every one will be guilty of such behaviour: and nothing can put an end to it, but social love. Instead therefore of being against the interest of any man, it is most essentially for the interest of all men: and were it to prevail universally upon earth, no injury would be attempted, no act of kindness neglected. For this, as *St. Paul* argues, *thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not covet; and if there*

there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, *thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; allows no commission, no omission, that may be hurtful to him: *therefore love is the fulfilling of the law**: all the obligations of human society are summed up in it. With perfect justice then doth our blessed Lord declare, that *on these two commandments*, right affection to God and to man, both which imply it towards ourselves, *hang all the law and the prophets†*.

But still, it may be, you will plead, "how happy soever the world would become, were all men influenced by these principles; yet, since they are not, why must we?" Because the whole can be amended only by the separate amendment of each part. "But, you will say, unless the rest will amend, of which, to speak moderately, there is no likelihood in our time, the wickedness and misery of mankind must, if we are to love them so well, and seek their good so earnestly, occasion us much fruitless pain, innumerable disappointments and melancholy reflections." Why, so it will, if we engage in too great, or too difficult, or too many undertakings; if we raise our expectations too high; or suffer opposition, either to kindle us into vehemence, or plunge us into despair. But we may go on very comfortably, if we preserve the true temper: exerting a calm settled benevolence on all fit occasions, because we ought; without hoping to succeed very often, or to produce on the whole any remarkable change for the better: but labouring the more constantly for this very reason, that not a little of what we do will, to all appearance, with respect to others, be labour lost. *In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not, whether shall prosper, this or that; or whether they both shall be alike good†*. But thus much we know however, that the seemingly most unprofitable exercises of kindness will not only be of unspeakable benefit to ourselves in the upshot, which might surely suffice us, but will prove some means in the hands of divine wisdom for bringing forth at length general good out of all evil. Being therefore thus *labourers together with God§*, why should not we be happy in our proportion;

* Rom. xiii. 9, 10.

† Eccl. xi. 6.

‡ Matth. xxii. 40.

§ 1 Cor. iii. 9.

proportion ; as he is perfectly, notwithstanding the failure of his gracious purposes towards a world, which he loves infinitely better, than the best of us can ?

But you will argue further yet : “ Whatever peace we may have within, we shall have none without, but be laughed at for poor tame wretches, and trampled on securely.” No such thing. Though few may imitate you, very few will in earnest despise you, and fewer still attack you in any material point. Love to all men cannot often provoke any man. And in case of assault, you are not forbidden the just methods of self-preservation ; you are commanded to be prudent, as well as *harmless** : you have the laws to protect you : all the good to support you, from inclination ; and most of the bad, if for no better a reason, yet least they should suffer next. You will scruple, I own, taking some advantages, by which they often succeed : but you will also avoid some disadvantages, by which they are often ruined. And, besides human helps, you will have the providence of God on your side, both to defend you, and perhaps to reward you openly even here. Or, should he see it best for you to go without temporal recompences, nay to suffer temporal inconveniences ever so grievous : bear but all patiently from a sense of duty to him, and you will be filled with consolation in this world, and assured of glory in that which is to come.

Trust him therefore boldly with the absolute direction of your hearts and lives. Let those, who resolve to be too cunning for their Maker, suppress and extinguish every friendly sentiment in their breasts, be blind and deaf to the distresses of all around them, pursue with unremitting fervour their own interests, their own pleasures, their own schemes of malevolence, *hateful and hating one another*†. But let us be *simple concerning evil, and wise only unto that which is good*‡ : *show mercy with cheerfulness, love without dissimulation, be kindly affectioned, in honour preferring one another, distributing to the necessities of the saints : rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep ; be not high-minded, but condescend to men of low estate*§ : look with pleasure on the virtues, the accomplishments, the success of others : be slow to believe their faults,

* Matth. x. 16.

† Rom. xvi. 19.

‡ Tit. iii. 3.

§ Rom. xii. 8,—16.

faults, think of them with concern, and treat them with mildness : *love even our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, and pray for them that despitefully use us, and persecute us. For so shall we be the children of our Father, which is in heaven ; who maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust**.

* Matth. v. 44, 45.

SERMON LVII.

OUR SAVIOUR'S TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS.

MATTH. iv. 1.

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil.

AS the word of God acquaints us with many things of great importance, concerning our present and future condition, which we could not else have known: so it opens to us particularly, a very interesting scene, in the discoveries which it makes of our connexions with the inhabitants of the invifible world, both good and bad. Indeed, that various orders of rational beings besides man, and superior to him, exist in this universe, is of itself extremely probable. That some, even of the highest of them, should become wicked, is only a wonder of the same kind, as that too many of the best abilities amongst men should make the worst use of them. That for their wickedness they should be *cast down** from *their first estate†*, and confined to a very different one, is a natural consequence of the divine justice and rectitude. That, though sufferers already for their crimes, they should yet be *reserved unto the severer judgement of the great day*, is but just the very thing that reason teaches concerning the sinners of the human race also. That they should be desirous in the mean time of seducing us into transgression, is very natural: for we see the profligate amongst ourselves desirous every day of doing the like. That this would be possible for them, is by no means inconceivable: for, since the material frame of our earth is confessedly liable to powerful influences from other

* 2 Pet. ii. 4.

† Jude 6.

other parts of the creation, why may not the intelligent natures in it be so too? That evil spirits should be permitted to assault us in a degree consistent with our freedom of will, is evidently as reconcilable both to the holiness and goodness of God, as that we are suffered to tempt one another, often perhaps full as dangerously. That they should be capable of conveying their suggestions to us, and we not know their manner of doing it, can hardly be called strange: for we scarce know the manner how any one thing in the world is done, if we examine it to the bottom; not even how we convey our own thoughts to those with whom we converse. And that we should be exposed to these temptations, without perceiving them to proceed from any such cause, is far from incredible: for we are frequently influenced, and strongly too, by persons of no higher powers and abilities than ourselves, without perceiving that they influence us at all.

But, though every one of these things is rationally supposeable, yet scripture only can satisfy us, that they are true in fact: and so accordingly it fully doth. For though it tells us, that bad angels are held *in everlasting chains under darkness**, it tells us likewise, that *our adversary the devil as a roaring lion walketh about*, meaning doubtless, within the extent of his chain, *seeking whom he may devour†*. And yet, even after the testimony of scripture given to these doctrines; as they relate to matters which lie out of sight, and therefore affect the mind but faintly, unless the truth and importance of them be carefully impressed upon it, we receive them too commonly with only a wavering kind of half belief, which produces no manner of serious thought about them. And so by degrees we first overlook, and then doubt, and then reject, one part after another, of what is revealed concerning the hidden regions of the creation; (as, indeed, if once we begin, where shall we stop?) till, at length, instead of *walking*, as christians ought, *by that faith‡*, which is *the evidence of things not seen§*, we come to consider earthly objects as the only realities, and heaven and hell, and the inhabitants of each, as nothing at all.

Some, it must be owned, far from disbelieving what they understand their bible to teach on these subjects, make it almost a point of religion to believe a great deal more: where-

VOL. II.

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* Jude 6. † 1 Pet. v. 8. ‡ 2 Cor. v. 7. § Heb. xi. 1.

as the plain and safe rule certainly is, to go as far scripture goes, but also to stop where scripture stops. For whatever notions are credulously entertained, beyond its warrant, will always, in the event, weaken, instead of confirming, the persuasion of its genuine articles. But undeniably, the prevailing extreme at present is, that of questioning, or slighting, though we do not question, whatever is placed a little without the reach of our own faculties, be it ever so clearly asserted by our Maker himself. This turn of mind is highly undutiful; and tends to mislead us, in the whole of religion first, and then of common life. The remedies for it are, to think of ourselves with humility, and read and consider the doctrines of God's word with reverent attention. That of our being tempted by invisible powers needs not have any wrong effects upon us, and may have very right ones. For, as these temptations are not distinguishable by us from those which arise of themselves in our own breasts, and may be resisted effectually by the same methods, the belief of them can by no just consequence drive us either into superstition or despondency. But the consideration of having such an additional adversary, besides the world and the flesh, must naturally increase our watchfulness, and thankful dependence on the help of divine grace: and the reflexion that, in committing sin, we are complying with the suggestions, and gratifying the malice, of the enemies of God, of our own souls, and of the whole creation, cannot but incline us to a strong abhorrence even of such transgressions, as we might else have been disposed to view in a pleasing light.

Now, of all the passages of scripture which relate to this point of doctrine, there are none more instructive, than those of the evangelists, in which we find our blessed Lord himself assaulted by the tempter: whose victory, for that reason, the wisdom of the church hath taken care to set before our eyes in the gospel for this day, as the properest admonition to us in the beginning of the present season: the business of which, if we purpose to be at all the better for it, is arming ourselves against those temptations with which we may meet hereafter, as well as humbling ourselves for having yielded to so many already. And therefore I shall now endeavour,

I. To explain this part of our Saviour's history.

II. To point out, in a few words, the practical uses that flow from it.

I. To explain this part of his history.

The number of wicked spirits is represented in scripture as very large. And yet one only, denoted by the name of *Satan*, or the devil, is generally mentioned as inciting men to sin. The reason of this, in other places of holy writ, may be, that, as they are all united under one head, and engaged in one design, they are to be regarded by us as one adversary: for, in the common language of war, we speak of the enemy in the singular number, when yet we mean a multitude. But there is more especial ground for it, in the text, as unquestionably *the prince of the demons** himself would personally engage in so arduous a combat, as that with *Jesus* must appear likely to prove. That he, who bears ill-will to all men, should earnestly wish to mislead and pervert one, whom he could not but see to be a very extraordinary man, and sent on some errand of singular benefit to the human race, was to be expected. And that he should hope to do it, may be accounted for, partly from hence: that as wicked men, though of eminent abilities, are perpetually attempting very absurd things, so may wicked spirits too: as indeed all wickedness implies, in its very nature, the absurdest hope and attempt in the world; that of being gainers by disobeying a wise and just ruler, of infinite power. Besides, the devil had fallen himself, even without a tempter: he had succeeded by the means of temptation against the first man, and more or less against all men since; and probably he knew not distinctly what manner of person this was whom he assaulted. For though he might know him to have been declared the Son of God, still that name is capable of various meanings. Or, if he knew him to be the promised Messiah, yet he might imagine that this promise, as well as others, was a conditional one, though no condition was expressed; and therefore liable to be defeated. Or, at least, rage might urge him to molest, though he despaired to overcome.

But then, why *the Lord of all*†, who quickly afterwards cast out demons with a word, submitted previously to such repeated indignities,

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* Matth. ix. 34. The word here is not *Διαβολός*, nor is that ever used of wicked spirits in the plural number: and therefore it is properer to say demons, than devils. † Acts x. 36.

indignities, as these trials made of him by the power of darkness, perhaps we cannot fully say. But this at least may be said very safely, that, for any thing we know, it might *behave him*, not only, in general, *to be made in all things like unto his brethren*, that so he might resist the devil on our behalf perfectly, whom we resist very imperfectly; but, in particular, to give the enemy all advantages and opportunities, in order to make his defeat more conspicuous: besides that we may gather, as I shall shew you in the conclusion, much instruction and much comfort from the benefit of his example, and from the condescending assurance, which *his having suffered himself, being tempted*, affords, that he will *succour* us when we *are tempted* also*. The wicked one made this attack upon him at the beginning of his public appearance, because undoubtedly he thought no time was to be lost for preventing the good intended by it. And *Jesus was led up of the Spirit* purposely to meet him, because the divine omniscience foresaw the event. As for the choice of the wilderness for the scene of action; we find, that he often retired into places of solitude for meditation and prayer: and no wonder if he did it now, before he undertook the inexpressibly weighty office, for which a voice from heaven had just marked him out. The addition of fasting to his devotions was another instance (his baptism had already been one) of *fulfilling all righteousness*†, by doing, in obedience to God's general appointment, what, if he did not want, good men in all ages have experienced, when used on fit occasions, and to proper degree, very needful and beneficial. His fasting the determinate number of forty days, leads us immediately to recollect, that *Moses* the giver of the law, and *Elias* the chief of the prophets, did the very same thing in their times, which he, who *came to fulfil the law and the prophets*‡, did now. Nor are there wanting remarkable coincidences of the number of forty on other occasions. What secret of providence may lie concealed under them, appears not yet: future occurrences, perhaps, will shew it. But, in the meanwhile, we may venture to say this: that as our Saviour used so long and total an abstinence but once, and we are incapable of using it so much as once; repeating a faint shadow of it every year cannot be our duty merely from his example: and

* Heb. ii. 17, 18.

† Matth. iii. 15.

‡ Matth. v. 17.

and that neither himself nor his apostles having laid any such command upon christians, the fast of *Lent* stands only on the footing of human, though ancient, injunction, and private prudence.

During these forty days, it is observed by *St. Mark*, our blessed Redeemer *was with the wild beasts*; which words must imply, else they are of no significance, that the fiercest animals were awed by his presence, and so far laid aside their savage nature for the time: thus verifying literally what *Eliphaz* in *Job* saith figuratively concerning a good man. *At destruction and famine shalt thou laugh, neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth; for they shall be at peace with thee**. Nor doth *St. Mark* only, but *St. Luke* also acquaint us, that throughout these whole *forty days he was tempted of Satan*†; though in what particular manner, they have not said; nor perhaps did he inform his very apostles: there being many things in his life, that were mysterious even to them; and no marvel then, if they are so to us.

When the days of his miraculous fasting were completed, the tempter came to him in a visible form: a thing, which we have neither any reason from hence to fear will ever be our own case, or to believe is ever the case of other common men; nor yet to doubt of its having been his, from its never being ours or theirs. For the whole life of *Christ* was so full of wonders, that the history of his temptation is perfectly agreeable to the rest: and we must either question all, or no part. In what likeness the devil appeared, we are not told: probably resembling one of the good angels, who seem by *St. Mark* to have attended our Saviour, and *ministered unto him*‡, in the course of this wonderful dispensation, before his combat, as well as after his conquest. We learn from *St. Paul*, that *Satan* hath been sometimes *transformed into an angel of light*§. And such a transformation, on the occasion before us, not only suits best with his two last temptations, but was certainly the likeliest to procure him success in any of them. At least he certainly did not appear what he was: for that would intirely have frustrated his intent. And accordingly we find, that as soon as he knew himself to be discovered, he despaired and fled.

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* *Job* v. 22, 23.

† *Mark* i. 13.

‡ *Mark* i. 12. *Luke* iv. 2.

§ *2 Cor.* xi. 14.

The first attack which the tempter made, was grounded on the bodily necessities of our blessed Lord; now again permitted to feel the appetite of hunger; and destitute, where he was, of all means to satisfy it. On this foundation the devil raised a proposal of refined artifice: that he should instantly make an experiment, and give a proof, of the truth and extent of the late declaration from heaven in his favour, *this is my beloved Son**, by ordering a supernatural supply for the want which pressed him. *If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread†.* Every one, perhaps, may not immediately see where the fault of this would have been; which is the very circumstance that made it a fit temptation. Satan had no prospect of being able to lead him at one step into a gross transgression: and any real deviation, however small, from either piety or virtue, would have answered his end. Now, compliance with this counsel would have been a deviation. The voice from heaven alone carried evidence enough along with it of God's especial regard to him: and desiring a yet fuller demonstration of it would certainly have argued a blame-worthy diffidence. He had been supported by the sole word and will of his heavenly Father for forty days: why must he now, without any sufficient notice of the change of that will, attempt a new miracle for providing himself bread to live on; as if the old one, which enabled him to live without it, had lost its force? When God designed him to return to the ordinary way of life, he would furnish him with every thing requisite for it: but in the interval, it had been as absurd for him to think of producing bread for himself in the wilderness, as for *Moses* to have thought of producing it for the *Israelites* there, instead of the manna, rained down from heaven for their sustenance. And therefore he answered, with the utmost propriety, in his own case, exactly what *Moses* had observed to them upon theirs, *that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord‡.*

The wily serpent, appearing in all likelihood perfectly satisfied with this answer, and convinced that acting otherwise, than our Saviour did, would really have been distrusting God, proposes next, (and possibly under colour of making amends) to give him the most illustrious opportunity of shewing the highest

* Matth. iii. 17. † Chap. iv. 3. ‡ Deut. viii. 3. Matth. iv. 4.

est confidence in God that could be. And, the meek *Jesus* patiently yielding to what he clearly discerned the intention of, the tempter conveys him through the air, (no wonder that he suffered it, for he suffered wicked men to take much greater liberties with him afterwards) and places him on one of the battlements of the temple of *Jerusalem*; exhorting him to cast himself down in the sight of all the worshippers there assembled, and procure that glory to the deity, and that honour to himself, which must be the consequence of their seeing publicly and literally fulfilled in him that prediction of the psalmist concerning a pious man, which so eminently pious a one as he had certainly both reason and faith enough to depend on: *He shall give his angels charge concerning thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone**: possibly insinuating farther, by the use of these words, his own ambition of being employed as the instrument of so noble a miracle, for which he had just before shewn himself qualified, and the tutelary spirit of so excellent a person. But the Redeemer of mankind, far from being disconcerted by the sudden change of the argument, or dazzled by so specious a plea, calmly answers by another text of scripture, explaining and limiting that, which the seducer had quoted imperfectly, and applied wrong: *Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*†. As we ought not from diffidence to ask new proofs of his power, where we have had sufficient ones already, so neither must we from presumption urge him to do for us what we have no need of, and what therefore he hath given us no right to expect. For they, who throw away the natural means, which he hath bestowed on them for preserving themselves, forfeit all title to a supernatural protection.

Though unsuccessful in both these assaults, the tempter, notwithstanding, begins another without delay, probably built on the defeats which he had undergone. He places our blessed Lord, still giving way to his vain efforts, on a commanding eminence; represents to him from thence, in extended view, or mimic imagery, or pompous description‡, whatever was great and

* Ps. xci. 11, 12. Matth. iv. 6. † Deut. vi. 16. Matth. iv. 7.

§ Heuman, Diff. Sylloge, tom i. p. i. Diff. 7. thinks he only pointed towards each kingdom, and shews that *dux* and *ostendo* signify this. Bibl. Germ. 1748, Jan. p. 103. Spartian, in the life of Severus, saith, that from the top of a high mountain he saw Rome, & *orbem terrarum*. Cyprian, ad Donatum de Gratia Dei, p. 4. Ed. Fell, exhorts him: *transpice*

and splendid in the kingdoms of the earth; alledges, that to himself, as the vicegerent of the Almighty, the dominion of this sublunary world was granted; over which he was willing to place, on the reasonable terms of homage done to him for it, one, of whose superior understanding and rightness of mind he had now made so thorough a trial. *All this power will I give thee; for it is delivered unto me. If therefore thou wilt worship me, all shall be thine**. To each of the former suggestions the holy Jesus had replied without emotion: but now, when the majesty of his heavenly Father was injured, and the faith of his own allegiance to him assailed, by so vile a falsehood, he bears no longer; tells the hypocrite, he knew him well for the adversary of God, who had granted to no created being, much less to him, the honours, or the authority, which he claimed; and commands him that moment to quit his presence. *Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and angels came and ministered unto him†*, doubtless whatever his condition required.

All hopes of seducing him were now at an end. What remained, was only to oppose and persecute him. And, as this method was taken very soon after the former failed, St. Luke observes, that *the devil departed from him but for a season‡*. Accordingly Christ himself expresses the whole of his public life on earth by the phrase of *his temptations§*. But as every contrivance of *the ruler of darkness||* against him proved ineffectual; so that, which he laboured most, and at length accomplished, the taking away of his life, instead of preventing the erection of our Saviour's rightful kingdom, gave the mortal blow to his own usurped tyranny. For *through death the Son of man destroyed him who had the power of death, that is the devil: and having spoiled principalities and powers, triumphed over them on his cross¶*.

II. I come now to speak briefly of the practical uses that flow from this part of our Saviour's history. And the following

te crede subduci in montis ardui verticem celsiorem, speculari inde rerum infra te jacentium facies; & oculis in diversa porrectis, ipse a terrenis contactibus liber, fluctuantis mundi turbines intueri. And hence he supposes him to see the whole of it.

* Luke iv. 6, 7.

† Matth. iv. 10, 11.

‡ Luke iv. 13.

§ Luke xxiii. 28.

|| Eph. vi. 12.

¶ Col. ii. 14, 15

ing are not inconsiderable: that the best of men are no more exempt from temptations, than others; but may possibly be tried with a larger share of them, and such as are harder to be withstood: that every one therefore ought, in every part of life, to prepare for them; and no one, merely on account of his suffering ever so many, to doubt of the favour and love of God: that allurements to evil may perhaps beset us with peculiar importunity in the entrance upon our christian course; but, if we resist them faithfully then, may cease in a great measure afterwards; and God's grace enable us to go safely and honourably through the severest conflicts of any other kind: that retirement and meditation, fasting and prayer, are the right preparatives against all solicitations to sin; which yet may come upon us in the very midst of our religious duties, and strictest observances; nay, *Satan* may seek advantage from them to mislead us: that if, even at such times we are not secure, much less are we so in the midst of the cares and pursuits, but especially the pleasures of life; by thoughtless indulgence of which, we invite and aid the tempter, whom we ought to shun and oppose: that we should never venture out of the plain road of duty, to supply the most urgent necessities: never run into needless danger, in hope of extraordinary deliverance; never accept the greatest advantages, when offered as the price of our innocence; that riches, and honours, and power are the most dangerous of trials, being reserved for the last in the case of our blessed Lord: and whoever can reject them instantly with indignation, when offered on sinful conditions, as he did, is far advanced in the road to perfection: that laying up the doctrines and precepts of scripture in our hearts, ready for use, is providing the best defence against our spiritual enemies; yet that scripture itself may be easily perverted to misguide us, unless we carefully interpret one part of it by another, and every one by the design of the whole: that the effectual way of dealing with all evil suggestions, is to repel them with an immediate, and short, and determinate answer, founded on God's word; and that permitting them to reply to us, and plead with us, is only giving them a handle to deceive and destroy us: that they, who are led by the providence of God to meet difficulties, will, if they ask it, be filled with the Spirit of God to go through them; and so *with the*

*temptation he will also make a way to escape** : or, to speak in St. James's words, that *if we resist the devil, he will flee from us* : and *if we draw nigh to God, he will draw nigh to us†*. That since we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one, who was in all points tempted like as we are, we may come boldly through him to the throne of grace, and find help in time of need. But then, as he was tempted without sin‡, we must imitate, though we cannot equal him ; and really, though not perfectly in this life, conquer sin also : for only *to him that overcometh will he grant to sit with him in his throne§*. Yet, as the tempter departed from our Lord himself only for a season, we are not to imagine, that he will ever depart wholly from us : but may still comfort ourselves, that if we put on the armour of God, and wrestle against him as we ought, we shall be able to stand against all his wiles|| : nay, every attempt to weaken our virtues, shall only prove a wholesome exercise to strengthen and improve them ; till at length, having fought the good fight of faith, we shall lay hold on eternal life¶ ; and not only the angels, who minister to us now assistance in our conflict, shall join with our fellow saints in applauding our victory, but the captain of our salvation§§ himself acknowledge us openly for his good and faithful soldiers and servants††. *Blessed is the man that endureth temptation : for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them who love him‡‡*.

* 1 Cor. x. 13.

† James iv. 7, 8.

‡ Heb. iv. 15, 16.

§ Rev iii. 21.

|| Eph. vi. 11, 12.

¶ 1 Tim. vi. 12.

§§ Heb. ii. 10.

†† Matth. xxv. 21. 2 Tim. ii. 3.

‡‡ James i. 12.

SERMON LVIII.

THE MISERY AND UNHAPPINESS OF A SENSUAL AND WORLDLY SPIRIT.

PHIL. ii. 21.

For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's.

THESE words contain both an account what the practice of mankind is, and also an intimation what it should be. And therefore, in discoursing upon them, it will be proper,

I. To consider what is meant by *seeking our own things*.

II. What by *seeking the things of Jesus Christ*.

III. To explain and prove the assertion, that *all seek* the former, *not* the latter.

IV. To shew what we are to learn from it.

I. *Seeking our own things*, is pursuing our own inclinations and fancies, or imagined worldly interest. And many strange fancies people of all ranks indulge. Some never ask themselves, whether the course which they are taking is likely to be for their good: others never slacken it, though from time to time they strongly suspect it is not. Often they adopt, without examination, the opinions of those about them, whom yet they are far from esteeming: and either will not see, that better judges think differently; or do see it, and will not regard it, but follow custom blindfold, even against their own liking. Or it may be, they think a little, but think short; neither to the end; nor to any considerable part, even of the present life; imagine what pleases now, must always please; and what brings no inconvenience yet, will never bring any. Indeed, usually it is their principle point, to acquire the things which others wish for, though visibly of no real use; and they are vehement for whatever will make them envied as happy persons, though it produce little else than vexation and guilt. Some will not trust even their own experience against their prepossessions; but force themselves to believe, that the lives which they lead must needs be delightful, though they feel the
contrary

contrary. Many lose the opportunities, and even the [relish, of moderate and rational pleasures, by a wild pursuit of visionary and extravagant ones. Nay, there are some, who not only follow wrong ways, but, as the text hath it, *seek* them: go purposely out of the plain road, as it were, in search of misery. It were much to be wished, that all these were more studious of their interest, even their temporal interest, than they are: it might be one step towards becoming what they ought. But still the most faithful and assiduous worshippers of the world's great idols, applause, advancement, profit, power, entirely mistake, if they hope that any of these things will either secure them lasting enjoyment, or preserve them from acute misery. A little reflection discovers, that happiness consists in somewhat stable and inward: whence the more thoughtful have learned to seek it in themselves. But, alas! when we inspect ourselves, what a mixture do we find, of ignorance which we cannot enlighten, of weakness which we cannot strengthen, of wrongness which we cannot set right! Besides that all creatures, as such, are essentially insufficient for their own happiness; there is by nature a void within us, which must be filled from above, or we must remain for ever craving and unsatisfied. Let us therefore look upwards, and consider,

II. *The things which are Jesus Christ's*: the benefits that he hath procured for us, with the knowledge of them that he hath communicated to us. And indeed what have we of value, that is not his? Some have pretended they could investigate all the doctrines, the duties, the rewards of religion completely by their own reason, and form themselves to a suitable disposition by their own strength. But the history of heathenism clearly shews, that no one ever did this; nor probably therefore ever would. The one true God was scarce known. False deities of the worst characters were adored, instead of him, with rites that seldom, if ever, mended their votaries, often corrupted them. The common rules of social life were by no means thoroughly understood; as the shocking custom of exposing children to perish, the barbarous combats of gladiators, the promiscuous and unnatural practices of lewdness, publicly allowed, give dreadful proofs. But the internal virtues of the heart were still less regarded; and they who seemed possessed of them, ascribed the merit wholly to themselves: very few said so much as the Pharisee, *God, I thank thee, that I am not*

as other men are ; scarce any with the publican, *God be merciful to me, a sinner* §. Yet how continually are the best of men guilty of faults ! But they had hardly any notion of the universal need of repentance, or any name for humility of soul. Forgiveness of injuries was very unsteadily taught : benevolence to enemies lay yet farther out of sight. Courage injuriously exercised, patriotism shewn by invading the rights of their neighbours, and numbers of other splendid sins, passed for heroic excellencies. There was very little hope of future bliss to give men spirit in doing what was right, and less fear of future judgment to deter them from what was wrong. Such were the best instructed nations : and such, or worse, had we been probably now, but for the compassion of Jesus Christ. Indeed without him we should never have known, till too late, how bad our condition was. The real state of mankind, with respect to God, was, in a great measure, unknown to them, till he underwent what he did, at once to lay open to us our danger, and to free us from it on most equitable terms. Even the mysterious parts of what he taught for this purpose lead us to reverence the divine wisdom, and think modestly of our own ; while the more distinctly intelligible direct us to every thing that is right and fit.

The gospel hath laid the foundation of our duty in that pleasing and thankful veneration of God, which his creating bounty, his providential care, his redeeming mercy, excite : and which tends to inspire us, with a deep concern for whatever we have done offensive to him, an earnest desire of obeying his commands, an humble sense that we need his assistance, a firm persuasion that he will grant it to us, a cheerful reliance on him for every thing that we want, in regard to this world or the next. This excellent frame of mind must powerfully suppress irregular appetites of sense, immoderate desires of wealth, vain fondness for pomp and pre-eminence, anxious cares about worldly events. And on such love of God christianity builds its second great commandment, love of our neighbour : a duty, enjoined in a higher degree, and carried to a greater extent, though still a reasonable one, in scripture, than in any other institution of religion. It prescribes the most accurate and tender attention to the obligations which result
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from the nearer connections in life, the most industrious endeavours to be useful in whatever station we fill, the most affectionate faithfulness to the community of which we are members, tempered with universal good-will to the rest of mankind: benevolent respect towards those who excel us; readiness to pardon, as far as can be safe, all who have wronged us; esteem of whatever in any person deserves it; sincerely kind wishes to those whom we esteem the least; compassion for the wretched, and relief to our utmost ability, though we straiten ourselves. Nor doth our blessed Redeemer expect us only to pity, as he did, the temporal wants of men; but, as he did also, their spiritual ones unspeakably more; a precept peculiar to the gospel, and comprehending a great variety of important particulars: provision for instructing the young and ignorant; and combining afterwards pious advice with outward relief to the sick and needy; seasonable warnings, and mild reproof, when there is hope of their being regarded; constant circumspection to set a prudent, as well as innocent example; that we lead not others into danger, by what, perhaps, we can do ourselves with safety; but submit to considerable restraints, rather than let *our liberty*, as the apostle expresses it, *become a stumbling block to them that are weak* *. Studying to observe these rules, for they require and merit study, is *seeking the things that are Jesus Christ's*. And they are opposed to our own, not as being really contrary even to our present interest: very far from it. Only through the inbred disorder of our hearts, and the general prevalence of evil habits, we are apt to delight in very opposite dispositions: and hence a good life comes to be a self-denying one, which else would be the constant practice of self-love. The ambitious would *seek the true honour that cometh from God* †; the selfish would *have respect to the heavenly recompence of reward* ‡: the lovers of pleasure would secure the *fulness of joy* which is *for evermore* §: and the means of being happy here and hereafter would evidently appear to be the same. But now the difficulties of performing our duty are so great, and our failures in it so many, that amongst *the things that are Jesus Christ's*, we must seek with peculiar earnestness his grace to strengthen us,

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* 1 Cor. viii. 9.

§ Psal. xv. 12.

† John v. 44.

‡ Heb. xi. 26.

and an interest in his merits to procure us acceptance, which thus the weakest and worst of us all may be sure of obtaining.

Yet, great as these blessings are, the apostle hath said, that *all men seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ*. Let us therefore,

III. Examine into the meaning and the truth of this melancholy assertion.

It is plainly not to be taken in the utmost extent. For he had given the contrary character of *Timothy*, just before, as he hath of others elsewhere. But he may well be understood to say, that all absolutely have some share of blame in this respect: and the generality, which in common speech the word *all* frequently signifies, are highly and dangerously blameable. For who can deny this to be fact? Many are vicious in every way that inclination prompts them to. Many, who regard some parts of virtue, disregard others, perhaps avowedly. The more uniformly regular would do well to ask themselves, whether it is from a real inward sense of duty, or for the sake of reputation or convenience? They who make a conscience of behaving right in common life, do they make any of paying due honour to God? our strongest obligations of every kind are to him: yet numbers think highly of their own merit, while they neglect him; and, it may be, pique themselves on neglecting him. If we profess ourselves believers in him, do we stately and fervently pray to him, and give him thanks for his daily blessings? do we live in his fear and love, and the hope of his future mercy? Supposing we sincerely embrace natural religion; have we carefully enquired into the truth of christianity; unprejudiced by attachment to forbidden pleasures by the vain fancy, that nothing can be true which we comprehend not fully, by ludicrous or sophistical misrepresentations? And, to guard us against these, have we consulted proper books and persons? If we call ourselves Christians, do we observe conscientiously all the institutions of christianity; or slight them when any trifle intervenes: and do we observe them otherwise than as mere forms? Do we use them to impress on our souls the importance of the doctrines, the pardon, the grace, the rewards of the gospel? And do we employ our faith of all these things to improve us in every part of a Christian temper? This temper, and our inclinations, too often interfere

fere Which do we prefer? and where do we lay the foundation of our conduct? We ought not to lay it in attention to our own interests or amusements, joining now and then with them a little appearance, or perhaps a little reality, of religion, provided we can make it agree with them. But the rule is, *seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness* *. The ground-work of every thing good, is a devout resolution to do our whole duty. Each is to do it suitably to his own station: but all in whatever station, high or low, are to make it their inviolable concern: for God *hath given no man licence to sin* †. Whoever doth not feel this truth, as the most important one that belongs to his existence; and govern his conduct by it, in trying as well as ordinary cases, hath not *sought the things of Jesus Christ* in a due manner. And think then, I entreat you, how few have. A sad reflection! but we must remind our hearers to make it. Else how much pleasanter would it be to congratulate the good on their happy state, than to terrify the wicked; to encourage the modest and timorous, than to confute the presumptuous, and alarm the thoughtless!

But, such being the condition of the world, let us now consider,

IV. What we are to learn from it.

And certainly we ought to learn great mildness towards others, who are faulty; since, more or less, all are so. Even the first Christians, even the first of the Christian clergy, for of these, it must be owned, the apostle peculiarly speaks in the text, fell very short of perfection. And ever since, the best have had their defects, and the worst their good qualities. Let us therefore think and hope, as well as with any reason we can, of all. Yet still, they who abandon themselves to wickedness, and especially they who labour to pervert others, either in principles or practice, and to make a bad world worse, be they ever so agreeable, be they ever so useful to us, are to be avoided, and checked with more care, the more danger there is of their doing harm. That we are unable, from various circumstances, to exert this right spirit, may sometimes, perhaps often, be a just plea: but ought never to be made a false pretence. The firm purpose of doing it should always be kept in mind, and executed as soon as possible, with amends for the delay.

* Matth. vi. 33.

† Eccles. xv. 20.



delay. At the same time, in proportion that the bad give real marks of reformation, they should be diligently encouraged, yet with prudent, and cautious, and gradual kindness. But above all, the honest, the virtuous, the conscientious, the pious, ought to be countenanced, brought forward, and cherished, as *the salt and the light of the earth**, who preserve society from corruption and dissipation, who shew men the way to present and future happiness. Nor should they be rejected or despised, though sometimes inferior in qualifications of less moment, nay, though, in some respects, hurting, through mistake, their own good cause: of which, however, it is very unjust, though very usual, to condemn or suspect them, without or beyond reason.

But the principal point is, what we are to learn in regard more immediately to ourselves. If the world be so bad, there is great need to ask our hearts, what are we who make a part of it? Conforming to it implicitly is by no means the rule either of scripture or of reason; yet is it not too much our practice? A little honest enquiry would soon furnish the true answer. But we turn our eyes from what we have no mind to discern, and try to deceive not only others but ourselves. Yet to what end? God knows the truth. Men will know it, if they do not; and angels too. We ourselves know it in part all the while; and shall know and lament it to eternity, if we refuse to take the proper notice of it in time.

Examine therefore what the tenour of your conduct is. If it be dissolute or intemperate, the necessity of amending it is glaringly visible. If, though otherwise innocent, you consume your days chiefly in trifles; such waste of precious time, given for other ends, is highly criminal. Besides that, both the supinely indolent, and the busier votaries of idle amusements, expose themselves to various temptations, and set a dangerous example to those around them: the tendency of which, as it spreads, must be to make persons of all ranks, even the most important, and, by consequence, the community composed of them, insignificant, contemptible, and vicious. Further still: though your disposition be to things of more use, and so far commendable, yet if on any occasion you indulge either resentment or malevolence, however calm, towards any of

Vol. II.

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* Matth. v. 13, 14.

your fellow-creatures; if you are injurious or hard-hearted, from selfishness; or but thoughtlessly inattentive to the rights, the interests, the wants, the feelings of those whom you ought to regard, you may thus have contracted, in many ways, most heinous degrees of guilt. Nay, supposing you have been, and are, beneficent as well as harmless, but less so than you might; even this defect is a failure of duty. Not that you are to give way to scruples; there is no end of them: but to consider maturely, and consult worthy friends; what you can add to the good which you do already. Possibly it may be more than you imagine. Be it ever so little, do it but according to the best of your judgment, and God will accept it. But, at the same time, be sure to remember, that the rightest demeanor in worldly matters will not suffice; but our chief regard must be to him who made us, and whose therefore we are. From his goodness all that we enjoy proceeds: from his authority over us all our duties flow: and those, which are owing immediately to himself, surely require our principal care. But such duties as natural reason teaches, are far from being the only concern of those to whom he hath prescribed additional ones, founded on the important alterations which our primitive state, as we learn from scripture, hath undergone. Man is a fallen creature: *We are dead*, as the apostle strongly expresses it, *and our life is hid with Christ in God* *. Our hope of future happiness lies not in ourselves, but is reposed in the hands of the blessed Jesus, who purchased it with his blood: and *where our treasure is there must our hearts be also* †. Without affectionate and habitual movements of the soul towards the father of mercy, the author of salvation, the inspirer of holiness; without a deep sense of past guilt and present imperfection, an humble faith in the merits of our glorified Redeemer, and a firm reliance on the grace of the divine comforter, all our virtue, all our piety, will avail us nothing. For, when we have done our best, *we are but unprofitable servants* ‡.

You will object, perhaps, that indulging contemplations of this nature would engross our whole thoughts and time: the affairs of common life must be utterly neglected for them. But are you indeed at all near the borders of that danger? Or do not such objectors take thorough care to keep far enough out

* Col. iii. 3.

† Matth. vi. 21. Luke xii. 34.

‡ Luke xvii. 10.

out of the reach of it? You are by no means called only to acts of devotion, or only to the more sublime of moral duties. Prudent and moderate concern for our worldly interest is a duty. Every propriety and decency of life is a duty. Even ornamental accomplishments have their value. But from these concessions men conclude, that they may safely pay their main attention to what deserves but the smallest part; and imagine they are abundantly good christians, almost without any one peculiarly christian action or sentiment. At best, a few pious formalities, practised now and then, constitute their whole religion: and the rest of their life, and all their heart, is given up to what hath no tincture of religion in it: whereas inward reverence of God, as he is manifested to us in the gospel of *Jesus Christ*, ought to be our ruling principle; and extend its influence throughout each article, of our business, our conversation, our private thoughts.

Perhaps you will object again, that so very serious a turn of mind as this, will cast a gloom over every thing: and one must have some pleasure surely. But learn to be pleased with what you ought: and you will have inexpressibly more pleasure than you possibly can else. In other things you take pains, no small pains, to acquire a taste; often, for what is of no value; sometimes, for what is bad: and perhaps, after all, can succeed no further, than to put on the affectation of liking what you really do not, or get by habit a wretched craving for gratifications, which you cannot but despise and condemn. Employ yourselves better. Esteem what is estimable, and it will exalt instead of debasing you: love what is amiable, and it will reward your affection. *Love him* above all, who hath *first loved you**; and his service will be delightful: become such as he requires, and you will find satisfaction in every thing. It is a strange mistake, to imagine the burthens of religion insupportable; while we take much heavier upon ourselves from fancy and fashion. Were the gospel to injoin the fatigues, the expences, the dangers, which on reflexion we shall perceive caprice and custom do, that one argument against it would be accounted decisive.

The most serious person in the world may justly be also the cheerfullest. Even penitents, in the midst of their sorrow, at the very beginning of their amendment, enjoy a blessed

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hope

* 1 John iv. 19.

hope of forgiveness and acceptance, infinitely preferable to the highest pleasures of sin. But persons of confirmed goodness have a *peace* within their breasts, *which passeth all understanding** of those who have not experienced it, and all description of those who have. They feel no tormenting remorse, no disquieting dread of God or man. They are never agitated by malice or envy: seldom, and but gently, moved by anger. Pity indeed they often experience; but gratifying it comforts both others and themselves. Their behaviour is friendly, and therefore agreeable: their discourse lively, if nature hath qualified them for it; but at least inoffensive and conciliating. Their hearts are open, in a proper degree, to all the innocent amusements of life, and they long for none of the prohibited ones. Virtuous discretion preserves their health and spirits as much as worldly uncertainties permit, makes their circumstances easy, their families and dependants orderly and happy. Their judicious beneficence is very useful, their blameless example yet more. Thus they become blessings within the compass of their sphere: and surely reap no little joy from the esteem of others, but unspeakably more from the testimony of their own consciences. The best of them indeed are sensible of many failings; but all consistent with that sincerity, which God, they know, will recompense. They see through the whole course of life, that they are in the only right way; and whatever may happen to them, all will end well. Disappointments, unkindness, ingratitude, losses of friends or of fortune, necessity, pain, sickness, and death, *work together for their good*†, and unite to form an infallible plan for encreasing their final felicity. Never will society grow gloomy, but inexpressibly the cheerfuller, for being composed of such persons as these: and such ought the religious naturally to be.

Therefore you, who are truly religious, appear in character, and do credit to your cause. Despise with good humour and pity the impotent ridicule of the inconsiderate: let the world see that you are happy, and that your belief in God is the ground of it. Wear no dejected looks, put on no forbidding appearances; be affable, be courteous, be joyful. Avoid improper amusements; guard against fondness for those in which occasionally you may do well to join: but express
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* Phil. iv. 7.

† Rom. viii. 28.

a decent and modest, a mild and compassionate, not an angry or censorious, disapprobation of the common excesses in them; shew that you can relish life perfectly well without them, by engaging with alacrity in the proper business of your station, improving yourselves, and doing good to others. Never unreasonably magnify in talk, but assiduously demonstrate in fact, the comfort you have in observing the precepts and expecting the rewards of the gospel. Manifest, whenever opportunities present themselves, yet without any ostentation, the benevolent serenity which christian faith inspires, your enjoyment both of conversation and solitude in their seasons, your composure under doubts and uncertainties, your fortitude under crosses and afflictions, and your settled persuasion, that you shall ever be enabled to *possess your soul in gladness of heart**, and rejoice in the Lord *always†*.

Such behaviour will surely convince even the vicious and the prejudiced, if they have any reflection, that to seek their own advantage with success, they must *seek the things which are Jesus Christ's*. And if they ever intend it, the present time is always the best: but this present time is peculiarly so. Decency prohibits now the usual diversions: apply your vacant hours to a better purpose. The offices of the week throughout express in the most affecting manner, what your gracious Redeemer hath done and suffered for you: think deliberately in it, what you ought to do for him, indeed for yourselves. Think what you have been, and are, and what the faith you profess requires you to be: consider what fatal consequences will follow, perhaps very soon, if you neglect to amend, and how you shall accomplish this necessary work. Read with reverence the rules and declarations of God's word; read with attention other awakening, yet prudent books, reflecting as you go along: and engage some pious, but judicious friend, to excite, support, direct, and, if there be occasion, restrain you. Form discreetly by their helps needful resolutions: and beg earnestly of God's strength to fulfil them: else they will all prove ineffectual. But remember, that the piety of the week, however strict, is not to end with it; and cannot be really christian, if it doth. You are called to re-

collection

* Luke xxi. 19. Acts ii. 46. † Phil. iv. 4.

collection now, that you may practise vigilance all the rest of your days. Temporary, periodical *goodness*, that is *like the morning cloud, and as the early dew goeth away**, it will be of no avail to any one; but they, *who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality, are secure of obtaining eternal life†.*

* Hof. vi. 4.

† Rom. ii. 7.

S E R M O N LIX.

THE JOY AND EXULTATION OF ST. PAUL IN PUBLISHING THE
DOCTRINES AND PRECEPTS OF CHRISTIANITY.

GAL. vi. 14.

*But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our
Lord Jesus Christ; by whom the world is crucified unto me,
and I unto the world.*

WE must have some foundation, real or imagined, for thinking well of ourselves and our condition; or we must be wretched. And innumerable are the methods which men take to procure the esteem of their own minds. Too many *glory in their shame**: are proud of notions and discourses, which misrepresent sacred truths, degrade human nature, and tend to dissolve human society; of gratifying their passions, their appetites, their fancies, whatever mischiefs it produces; of doing what visibly hurts, and must finally ruin their characters, their fortunes, their healths, their souls. Others value themselves on more plausible, yet insufficient, pretensions: on the lustre of an ancient family, which perhaps they disgrace; on the inheritance or acquisition of wealth, which they employ to little or no good purpose; on agreeableness of person, which makes them vain and imprudent the short time it continues, and miserable when it decays; on liveliness of wit, which either provokes enemies, or invites dangerous friends; on depth of knowledge, often falsely so called, and pernicious, often wholly foreign to their true business; on elegance of taste in smaller matters, while they are contemptibly injudicious in the greatest; on pomp and shew, which give a pleasure as fleeting as it is childish; on making a figure in
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* Phil. iii. 19.

the idle hurry of amusements, which encroaches on every valuable purpose of life, and wears out the spirits under pretence of raising them; on the favour of the great, by whatever arts attained, and however precarious; or on the seemingly more solid possession of power, which it is hard to abstain from using ill, and extremely hard to use in a due measure well; which disoblige by the exercise of it many more than it can possibly oblige; is accompanied with perpetual fatigue and uneasiness, yet with perpetual envy: causes innumerable vexations while it lasts; and yet commonly grievous regret when it is gone.

If all these be wrong grounds of self-complacency, how few of us have right ones! There are those, however, who profess to build it on something more substantial, on virtue. But, alas! the virtue of great numbers consists almost wholly in specious words, honour, benevolence, good-nature, which are either a mere ornament of their talk, or influence their behaviour only on some occasions, or to some persons. And the more uniformly well inclined towards others are often strangely addicted to blameable indulgence of themselves: or, however inoffensive otherwise, are lamentably defective in the discipline of the heart, particularly in forming it to that deep humility, which becomes dust and ashes. If we think too highly of ourselves, we shall be fatally misled: and, if we think reasonably, we shall experience the daily mortification of being faulty, more or less, even in those things for which we are applauded. Besides, our virtue itself will frequently oblige us to do what others will dislike, oppose, revenge. Or, though we escape such evils, yet the unavoidable ones of fear, sorrow, languor, pain, sickness, death, are usually more than enough to make our present state a pitiable, rather than a glorious one, if the consciousness of our own rectitude be our whole support under them.

Wiser men, therefore, in their search of comfort, look beyond themselves to God. And, indeed, faith in him, provided it represents him as a righteous governor, observing, distinguishing, and recompensing, unspeakably dignifies our condition, and adds importance to our prospects. But still, our best obedience being only his due, and paid only out of what we have received from him, we could neither boast nor merit,
though

though it were perfect: and what his free goodness would bestow on us even then, beyond security from their being sufferers on the whole, reason could never ascertain.

Or, were the innocent assured by it of ever so great rewards; are we innocent? Thoughtless presumption may answer hastily in the affirmative: but what doth the deliberate voice of conscience say, after a faithful scrutiny of our past actions, words, and thoughts, as in the divine presence? Such and so many as our duties are, of love, reverence, and resignation to our Maker, of justice, equity, goodness, in the numerous relations of life, virtuous command of our various inclinations, careful use and upright government of our understanding; have we been always as blameless in each of them, as infinite purity can demand of us, though we see that no one round us hath? If not, let us remember it, we are sinners, and sin deserves punishment. *God forbid then that we should glory in our moral or religious characters: God grant we may find mercy for our failures in them.*

But how can reason assure us that we shall? Doth it know, what the holiness of his nature, the honour of his government, the admonition of other parts of his creation, may render needful? Sorrow for what is past cannot annihilate it: and living well for the time to come, though it were not mixed, as what we call so is, with perpetual faults, no more makes amends for past transgressions, than avoiding to incur new debts pays off the old. Still our hearts dictate hope. But hope, far from being certainty, is not so much as persuasion. And though pardon were unquestionable, future happiness, much less eternal, would not. The possibilities therefore, the probabilities of these things, which nature can suggest, how reviving soever, compared with absolute despondency, *have to christians, as the apostle speaks in a similar case, no glory by reason of the glory that excelleth**: they fade away and vanish before his *precious promises†*, who was *delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification‡*.

Here then we have sure ground for glorying: not in ourselves indeed; for we have contributed nothing to this merciful dispensation, besides falling into the extreme need of it by our

VOL. II.

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offences:

* 2 Cor. iii. 12.

† 2 Pet. i. 4.

‡ Rom. iv. 25.

offences: but *Christ Jesus is made unto us of God, wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, that, as it is written, he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord**. We have only to embrace, with acknowledged unworthiness, the gracious offer of our heavenly Father, on the equitable conditions annexed to it.

But we must embrace the whole, not part only. Multitudes profess to respect the gospel very highly, for its many rational doctrines, its holy and mild precepts, its interesting sanctions, its provision for instructing mankind, the good example of its publisher, its declarations of forgiveness, nay perhaps also for its assurances of inward assistance. But of the efficacy of what our Redeemer underwent to procure these benefits, they entertain the lowest conceptions: raise difficulties on every article of *the great mystery of godliness*†, and explain away the scripture doctrine of it into nothing: strive to form a christianity as as much as possible without Christ, and be saved, if not by their own merits, however not by his. Therefore the apostle in the text lays the stress where it really lies: *God forbid, that I should glory in any thing, save in the CROSS of our Lord Jesus Christ: in his submission to die upon it, not merely as a confirmation of his sincerity, which puts his and his apostles martyrdoms almost on a level, but as a propitiatory offering, by which, to speak the language of holy writ, he hath reconciled us to God, making peace by the blood of his cross, in the body of his flesh through death*‡. That he appeared on earth to establish true religion there, bore the inconveniences of this mortal state, *endured the contradiction of sinners*§, and yielded up his life to their malice, is the universal belief of all christians: and why might not God, foreseeing these things from eternity, graciously accept his condescending to them for our sakes, though otherwise wholly foreign to a nature united to the divine, as a sacrifice offered on our behalf to infinite justice: bestowing on the priest and victim the most acceptable retribution that he could possibly receive, the right of pardoning, reforming, and making eternally happy, as many as should throw themselves on the mercy thus tendered them, and prove the sincerity of their thankful faith, by that of their obedience?

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* 1 Cor. i. 30, 31. † 1 Tim. iii. 16. ‡ Col. i. 20, 21, 22. § Heb. xii. 23.

We are far from pretending to know all the reasons of a transaction, *into which even angels desire to look**: yet surely considerate minds may trace in it evident footsteps of holiness, goodness, wisdom: but at least humble hearts will recollect, that *the imagined foolishness of God is wiser than men†*; and finding, as every one living must on due search, that they have no cause to glory in themselves, will glory most cordially in *the cross of Jesus Christ*: ascribing to his intercession their forgiveness, to his strength their good actions, to his merits their reward. *Not by works of righteousness, which we have done, but according to his mercy, God saveth us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he sheds on us abundantly through Christ Jesus our Saviour, that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs of eternal life‡. Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever§.*

But then we cannot be intitled to such exultation, unless we are qualified as the latter part of the text intimates. *Faith* indeed *saveth us||*, but that alone *which worketh by love¶*, to God, to our fellow creatures, to every thing good: which cannot consist with a ruling love to the ways of an evil world. Therefore St. *John* saith, *if any man love the world*, that is, preferably, *the love of the Father is not in him***; and St. *Paul* only expresses the same meaning a little more strongly, when he reminds us by his own example, that *we must be crucified, dead, to the world, and it to us††*: we must sacrifice all inordinate fondness for it to him, who sacrificed himself on the cross for our salvation; and mortally hate whatever is wrong in it, at the risque of being mortally hated by it. Still the comforts of life, which God hath provided for us, are to be enjoyed with duly proportioned gladness and thankfulness: the subordinations of life are to be maintained, the common business of it followed, the proprieties and civilities of it preserved, and perverse non-compliances diligently avoided. But, when all this is done, much will remain to be renounced and *crucified*. For as St. *John* hath admonished us, *we are of God, and the whole world*, even what calls itself the christian world, *lieth in*

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* 1 Pet. i. 12.

§ Rev. v. 13.

** 1 John ii. 15.

† 1 Cor. i. 25.

|| Eph. ii. 8.

†† Gal. vi. 14.

‡ Tit. iii. 5, 6, 7.

¶ Gal. v. 6.

*wickedness**: powerfully encouraging every bad thing, to which our appetites and passions prompt us, and many to which they do not.

Fashion makes some men missionaries of infidelity, objecting against religion, even what they know to be false: others, implicit believers in them, to shew their own freedom of thought: and a third sort, utterly negligent of every act of piety, without so much as imagining they know why. Fashionable honour urges men to demands of satisfaction, equally wicked and absurd, often for no injury at all. Fashionable discourse abounds with oaths and imprecations, and irreverent uses of the most sacred names, not less foolish than profane; or, if clear of this fault, commonly sets the whole of what we are concerned to believe and do, in a mistaken light. Fashionable extravagance consumes in gaming, and luxury, and idle expences, what ought to provide for our families, for the worthy and the poor. Fashionable gratifications of the various pleasures of sense defeat the chief end of man's being. Even more innocent fashionable amusements swallow up that precious time, of which we should be frugal for better purposes. Fashionable hours interfere with the order of nature, with the public worship of God, with the regular disposition of all sorts of affairs. And fashionable complaisance places the vilest of human beings on the same footing with the most unexceptionable, to the dreadful weakening of the essential distinction between good and evil.

Yet in all these matters men will follow, with strange inconsiderateness, even the profligate. But they conceive themselves fully authorized to imitate, in every thing, such as common speech calls decent and reputable: titles, in some ages, to be had exceeding cheap. In one sex especially, and the other is copying after it, very small remnants, even of moral virtue, will suffice: and in the upper part of both, yet less of religion, if any at all, is needful. Accordingly many, who, from conscience, preserve some forms of it, rather look desirous to have them thought mere forms, and are wondrously shy of uttering a word to shew the contrary: pass off any mention of their regard to it as slightly as may be, and are content to let others
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* I John v. 19.

treat it with as much indignity as they will: instead of *glorifying in the cross of Christ, ashamed to confess him before men*, though he hath passed on that shame so awful a sentence*; and perfectly indifferent whether piety hath the support, which they must know it wants, provided they can make an acceptable figure to those around them; a point about which they are as solicitous, as if the apostle had said, *be ye conformed to this world*, instead of, *be ye not*†. Perhaps the more seriously educated scruple going at once the utmost lengths of the mode in wrong things: but are gradually familiarized to follow their leaders from one step to another, till they advance imperceptibly to a frightful distance from their first setting out; and it may be at last grow ambitious of being leaders in their turn of a little world of their own, that shall tempt the great one into still worse enormities.

Through the whole of this giddy progress, innumerable attentions, and incredibly earnest ones, to most insignificant matters, fill their hearts, and expel or deaden every devout and virtuous feeling. If they find leisure to reflect on their conduct, it is chiefly to invent excuses and palliations: if they still go to church, it is without desire of improving there: nay, if they still pray in private, which probably few of them continue long, it is little more than repeating thoughtlessly a few good words: and thus, by degrees, they come to have no real affection or veneration for their Creator, their Redeemer, their Sanctifier, no penitent sense of their own imperfections or transgressions, no practical or steady persuasion of future recompences; but form their whole manner of talking and judging, as if the present state were all: are extremely eager about their worldly interests and pleasures, but equally unconcerned about the rightness of their dispositions: will on no account be absent from a meeting for business which they have at heart, or a gay assembly to which they are invited, let their health or what will suffer: but neglect the appointed seasons of divine worship, on the poorest pretences, or without any: crowd business, journeys, diversions, into the most sacred seasons, contrary to the excellent ends of their institution, contrary to all law, and all shame; but would think their reputations undone by going to the house of God, at any unusual time, or even making, with
seriousness,

* Matth. x. 32, 33. Mark viii. 38. Luke xi. 26. xii. 8, 9.

† Rom. xii. 2.

seriousness, a momentary acknowledgement to him over their daily food: consult neither scripture nor reason to discover their duty: but make the artfullest use of either, to fence against what they are unwilling to own for such; or, if need be, avowedly prefer the opinion and practice of the world to both, disdainful rebels against heaven, but mean-spirited slaves to they scarce know whom.

Yet most of them tolerate, and perhaps approve, some appearances of religion, especially in some persons; but suspect any great reality of it, as a degree of madness: have the utmost terrors of seeing this poor land over-run with enthusiasm and superstition; but not the smallest dread of profaneness and profligateness: are startled at any new declarations of authority against either, but comforted by the hope, that they will prove ineffectual, and all go on as it did: read almost any thing written to depreciate christianity, and relax moral virtue, but almost nothing in favour of them; are very cautious of meddling with treatises of piety, however judiciously composed, for fear of turning their heads, but devour ever so many idle and even lascivious books, without the least apprehension of corrupting their hearts: allow themselves to be much more expensive in the vain-glorious display of private magnificence, or towards the support of entertainments called polite, though neither of good tendency nor good taste, than liberal to the truest charities: or, how bountiful soever to the temporal distresses of their brethren, have no compassion at all for their spiritual wants: nay, perhaps, have made formal resolutions of giving nothing to such and such pious uses, against which it is grown customary to inveigh, and hear no answer.

Yet many of them had originally no relish for this turn of thinking and acting: indeed still rather affect to seem, than really are happy in it; nay, possibly feel tormenting doubts from time to time how it will end. But these they are taught to consider as mere fits of gloominess, which they must dissipate by every mirthful avocation they can invent, and learn to despise themselves for ever having been in so strange a state of mind, and so unsuitable to living in good company. Or, if reflection will, notwithstanding, be troublesome, arguments must be sought for to quiet it. And accordingly they do argue,
that

that mens stations, connexions, and spirits require some relaxation, and they must take such as they can get, amongst those with whom it is to be had. But are they grieved or rejoiced at this pleaded obligation? Do they stop at the quantity or the kinds that are really needful, or go beyond them at pleasure? Are they growing better or worse all the while? Are they setting good examples or bad? Surely these are material questions. Yet they make a shift either to feel or to acknowledge nothing of their force; but whatever they like to join in, peremptorily insist, that it is harmless, useful, necessary, just what they please: yet reserving a liberty, when once it loses credit, to censure it as absurd and wrong every way, and be full as fond of something else, that deserves it as little, without confessing the least inconstancy.

For, with the world on their side, they come at length, instead of apologizing for themselves, to assume a sovereign authority over others; confute their objections with barely a contemptuous laugh or look, or by fixing on them any name in vogue, that denotes preciseness; attack and persecute the most silent nonconformists to their notions, and haughtily overbear all that stand in their way. Such as worship the same idol with them, be their characters ever so doubtful, must not be suspected; be they ever so notoriously criminal, must not be condemned; or counted unfit for their familiar acquaintance, or even particular friendship, let the consequences, private or public, be what they may. The pert ridiculers of religion and virtue are to be allowed abundance of wit in the filliciest and grossest things they utter: and the most hard-hearted libertines must be held to have true good-nature, because they have superficial gaiety. If they ruin themselves by their vices, they are only to be pitied: if others also, they are to be excused to the very utmost, it is well if not looked on as the more considerable. But men who have always been regularly virtuous are to be regarded as objects of derision. And such as add to their virtue inward religion, regulate their conduct by it, abstain from things on account of it; appear to take pleasure in its doctrines, its ordinances, its promises, and give any tokens of what the text calls *glorying in the cross of Christ*, they are to hope from this quarter for a very small share of the charitable candour, which is lavished so profusely on others.

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Their sincerity, or their understanding, is to be strongly questioned: their good dispositions and actions denied, or passed over in silence, or scornfully undervalued: ridiculous and dangerous singularities to be imputed to them, on the weakest evidence, or none; and if ever they fall into any such, they are to be aggravated beyond truth or credibility; and no plea whatever to be admitted in their favour. So very far are too many from answering the Psalmist's description of the man *who shall dwell in God's holy hill, that in his eyes a vile person is contemned, but he honoureth them, that fear the Lord**.

Even an infidel, were he to speak honestly, would tell such, that they are no christians. Yet, perhaps, they would be very angry with any one but an infidel for saying so, and in reality are by no means unbelievers. But why then will they not become consistent? If the gospel of Christ deserves any regard at all, it deserves a thorough regard: either it is nothing, or it is the most important of all things. And they who profess it, yet seldom think of it, who are influenced by it, if at all, to scarce more than a little outward shew, and slight and scorn the frame of mind which it was intended to create in them, *better had it been for them, unless they amend, never to have known it†*. All sorts of persons are concerned beyond expression to recollect this often: but two sorts beyond the rest. If you of the upper part of the world, who have most to be thankful and most to be answerable for, instead of being exemplary in serving God, are remarkable for neglecting his worship and his laws; not only the ingratitude, but the perniciousness of your behaviour, will greatly increase your punishment. And if we of the clergy, who teach others by our exhortations to *set their affection on things above, not on things on the earth‡*, teach them the reverse by our practice: make it our study to acquire applause, or wealth, or power, or rank, to partake of amusements and diversions in the poor low degree that for shame we can, or enjoy ourselves in some graver kind of voluptuous indolence; to do any thing, in short, but labour diligently in God's vineyard from first to last for the good of souls; we shall receive a double condemnation. And they who patronize any such of us, will share deeply in our guilt.

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* PS. xv. 1, 4.

† 2 Pet. ii. 21.

‡ Col. iii. 2.

It is not rigour that dictates any of these assertions to me. It was not austerity, but the tenderest compassion, that moved St. Paul to say, *for many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ, who mind earthly things* * : not always designed enemies, but real ones however. Our Saviour hath told us, *he that is not with me, is against me* †. And they that will be with him to effect, must be with him heartily, openly, and uniformly. We may have qualities very amiable, and do actions very laudable in the estimation of men, and yet our hearts be far from *right in the sight of God* ‡. He requires, as well he may, that we should consider ourselves principally as his creatures, as sinners, as favoured with offers of mercy and of grace, as bound to *live soberly, righteously, and godly, looking for the blessed hope of his glorious appearance* §. However the preference, which the world gives to very different matters, may bouy us up now in overlooking these, it will be no protection to us, when *the dead, small and great, shall stand before God* ¶. And however insipid or insupportable a life may appear to some, which is to be humbly spent in regulating their desires, doing their duty, and expecting their reward; they will find upon trial, that every other scheme produces miserable disappointments; and this, as much happiness as our present state is capable of. Length of days, easy circumstances, general esteem, domestic tranquillity, national good order and strength, are the smaller advantages that usually attend practising the rules of religion: but the constant ones, the calm peace and joyful prospects of all whose minds are duly affected by the genuine principles of it, these are blessings inexpressibly great.

You are not exhorted to begin a new course of life, and retain your old inclinations; making yourselves uneasy, without making yourselves better: but to acquire such sentiments, that you may delight in all you do. The vigorous exercise of good sense will contribute not a little to this desirable end; for, indeed, the ways of the world are often flat contradictions to it. But the fundamental rule is, learn a just value for the cross of Christ, for the pity he hath shewn, the pardon he hath purchased,

VOL. II.

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chased,

* Phil. iii. 18. 19. † Matth. xii. 30. Luke xi. 23. ‡ Acts viii. 21.

§ Tit. ii. 12, 13.

¶ Rev. xx. 12.

chased, the felicity he hath provided for you; and you will soon come to love the restraints and observances which he hath appointed, to look with indifference, or sometimes with disgust and abhorrence, on what you have hitherto admired, and find the degree of your satisfactions unspeakably encreased, by changing the nature of them from trifling, disgraceful, and noxious, to rational, noble, and beneficent. Still difficulties there will be, and to some persons peculiar ones, in breaking settled habits, and dissolving the ties by which you have been long held. But God will give you both courage and prudence, to make it easier than you think. Though you will do what is right with steadiness, yet you will do it without ostentation, and with chearful good-humour: speak mildly of others, and keep on as good terms with all men as you safely can. But, if you are too solicitous to please them, you will gradually slide back, and forget, as thousands have done to their eternal ruin, your former convictions. Therefore, whenever you feel any, suffer them not to die away through inattention, or be choaked by cares and pleasures, or blasted by the breath of scoffers: but impress them on your souls immediately and frequently, form resolutions corresponding to them, and confirm these by reading good books, by the conversation and countenance of good persons, by attendance on God's public ordinances; but especially by fervent private prayer, suited to your spiritual condition, with this, *out of weakness you will be made strong**: and without this, the seemingly firmest human purposes, think as highly of them as y u will, can never be effectual. *For God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble*†.

* Heb. xi. 34.

† Jam. iv. 6. 1 Pet. v. 5.

SERMON LX.

ON THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST, AND THE EFFECTS OF
THIS EVENT ON THE LIVES AND MANNERS
OF TRUE CHRISTIANS.

COL. iii. 1, 2.

*If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are
above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.*

Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

THIS day we are met to celebrate the yearly memorial of our blessed Lord's rising from the dead. Now the genuine method of paying honour to every article of our creed, is allowing it the proper influence on our hearts and lives. Christ's resurrection is vain with respect to us, unless we be raised by it to the faith of a better world; and the firmest faith of that is vain also, unless it excite us to love and *seek the things which are above*. This passage of St. Paul therefore is justly made one principal part of our *Easter day's* service: and the degree of our practical regard to it will be the true measure of our improvement by the discipline of the past season, and of God's acceptance of our celebration of the present. That each of these then may be such, as we are concerned beyond expression that it should, I shall lay before you the chief motives to a due regulation of our desires and behaviour, in relation to earthly and heavenly objects, which motives arise from considering ourselves,

I. As rational beings :

II. As believers in God :

III. As disciples of Christ: on which last point I shall enlarge the most, as it deserves.

I. Let us consider ourselves merely as rational beings, who are to live for a while on earth; and suppose, that we had no

farther prospect. Then indeed we could not *set our affections on things above*: but still we might set them a great deal too much on things below. For, if our attachments to worldly objects be strong, we shall frequently, either pursue what is hurtful, or be miserable that we dare not pursue it, or enraged at being crossed in our designs, or dejected on finding small happiness in our attainments: which indeed are incapable of yielding much. The delights of sense are destructive, when indulged to excess: and low and inconsiderable, when conducted with moderation. Wealth and power and rank are acquired with much difficulty, attended with much anxiety, and soon become familiar and tasteless. Fondness for gay amusements rather makes men uneasy when they are without them, than gives any mighty pleasure in the midst of them: and, unless they manage with uncommon prudence, wastes their fortunes, wears out their spirits, hurts their characters, exposes them to contempt. Indeed we cannot help on reflection condemning ourselves, for setting our hearts on any of these gratifications, to the neglect of matters visibly worthier. But if we follow them to the loss of our innocence, which generally happens when we follow them earnestly, then we have cause to hate ourselves too, for transgressing the dictates of that inward principle, which we feel ought to rule us, and which rewards us, when obeyed, with that pleasing consciousness of having acted well, which is the truest satisfaction we can taste, though all were to end at death. But even from this enjoyment, without the aid of religion, we can promise ourselves but little. Our failures and imperfections in virtue must be daily mortified: our rightest and kindest behaviour will often have ill returns made to it: they whom we love with the most deserved affection, may be miserable, or may be snatched from us: and if not, we must very soon leave them, and whatever we value. In such circumstances, disengagement is evidently the only way of securing any comfort. It will indeed, at the same time, render our condition flat and insipid: but we can aim at nothing better from the things of this world, without meeting with something worse: and if we are not contented with such a state, (as in truth how can we?) our sole remedy is to look beyond it: and consider ourselves.

II. Not merely as happening to be inhabitants of the dust of the earth for a few years, we know not how nor why, but

as created by the power, and placed under the authority and protection, of a perfectly wise, and holy, and good being, who hath made us capable of knowing and honouring, and therefore doubtless originally of imitating and obeying, him. On this farther view of things it will plainly appear, that the principle of conscience, which otherwise might often serve only to perplex and disquiet men, is the law of God written in their souls; and therefore that yielding to it will always end well: generally in this world, but certainly in another; for which human nature was evidently framed. Here then the distinction between *things above* and *things on earth* begins to open, the connection of virtue with happiness becomes manifest; and excites us to dispise the poor short-lived advantages that little minds are fond of; to esteem and practice what is right, be it ever so difficult, or ever so unfashionable, and devote our entire existence to the adorable author of it. The principal object, beyond comparison, of one who believes in God, must surely be God himself: and our reverence and love, our dependence and trust, are so to be placed on him, as on nothing else in his whole creation. But, above all, should these affections be exerted towards him in respect of that future recompence which we hope to receive from him. And we are greatly deficient in prudence, as well as gratitude, if we make not that expectation the support and the delight of our lives. But then the temper of heaven must be formed in us here, or we can never enjoy it hereafter: and therefore, if we would fix our hearts on any thing above to good purpose, we must fix them on resembling him who dwells there, in purity and benevolent goodness. Cultivation of these dispositions is both an appointed requisite, and a necessary preparative for our supreme felicity: whereas immersing ourselves in cares, or dissipating ourselves in pleasures, unrelated to piety and virtue, were they ever so harmless to those around us, must be pernicious to ourselves; rendering our minds either gross and sensual, or trifling and vain; unfit for the enjoyment of spiritual bliss. Every believer then, were it only of so much as nature teaches, must think it his primary concern to cherish religious sentiments. And though he were uncertain of the truth of his belief, yet, in a case of such infinite importance, there could be no doubt of his obligation to chuse the safer side. But, without farther guidance, though he were not under

der that necessity, he must be subject to others, and very alarming ones. It doth not appear to the eye of unassisted reason, what degree, or what duration, of future happiness we might promise ourselves, even were we innocent: much less what sinners, as we all are, abundantly worse than most of us think, have to expect from the Lord and Judge of all, to the honour of whose government repentance and amendment alone may be no adequate satisfaction, were they in our power, which persons left to themselves have too much experience that they are not; yet however, since we are very sure, that right sentiments and behaviour must make every man's condition better, and wrong ones worse than it would be else; looking up to God, with sorrow for our transgressions, with thankfulness for his mercy hitherto, and humble hope for it hereafter, must be the duty and the interest even of those who have no other light than their own understandings can afford them. But still the obscurity of their prospect must greatly diminish both their consolation from it, and its good influence upon them, and fill them with dreadful terrors from time to time. God be thanked, therefore, that we are not left in the darkness of natural religion, but blest with that view of the things above which proceeds from considering ourselves,

III. As the disciples of Christ. If the gospel of *Jesus* be true, and we have innumerable demonstrations of it, then there is full evidence, that a future state of eternal happiness beyond expression is attainable by faith in our dear Redeemer, notwithstanding our past sins, notwithstanding our present infirmities. For, having purchased for us life by his death, he hath given us assurance of it by his resurrection, and, in effect, raised up us at the same time with himself. *If then we be thus risen with Christ, where shall our hearts be but where our treasure is**: fixed on him, whose compassion planned the scheme of our salvation; on him whose love executed it; on him whose grace enables us to share in it; on that kingdom of glory, in which we shall reign after death; on those heavenly doctrines and precepts, by which we are to prepare ourselves for it in the mean while? That we *walk not by sight, but by faith†*; that we *labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that*

* Matth. vi. 21. Luke xii. 34.

† 2 Cor. v. 7.

*that which endureth to eternal life** : that we love not the world, neither the things that are in the world†, but have our conversation in heaven‡, as fellow citizens of the saints, and members of the household of God§.

There is a possibility indeed of taking such exhortations in too strict a sense, for want of observing, that rules, which we are apt to neglect and explain away, must be expressed in very strong terms to prevent this : and that often in scripture, when one thing is commanded, and another seemingly prohibited, the prohibition is not intended to be absolute, but comparative, as in the known instance, *I will have mercy, and not sacrifice*|| : when yet sacrificing was both lawful and enjoined ; but still to be looked on as forbidden, if it came in competition with a precept of more importance. Thus then we are to interpret the direction of withdrawing our hearts from this earth. Not that we should lay aside the common affairs of life, in order to spend our whole time in devotion : diligence in these affairs is one great duty of our *heavenly calling*¶. Not that we are restrained from using the good creatures of God with pleasure : for he hath *created them to be received with thanksgiving***, and *given us richly all things to enjoy*††. Not that we are to confine ourselves to mere necessities ; for undeterminable scruples would arise, what are necessities ; and as heaven hath provided us more, it would be only perverseness, or weakness, to refuse taking it. Not that industry to raise and better our worldly condition is blameable ; for a blessing from above is promised to such industry. Not that we are to live in a perpetual fright, because it is doubtful, how far precisely we may gratify our natural desires in this thing or that : for we serve a gracious master, who means that we should be always cheerful and easy in his service, so long as to the best of our judgements we are faithful in it. Not that we are to think even the gayer accomplishments of life sinful : but rather chuse to make virtue and piety more amiable by them ; provided it be only virtue and piety that we adorn with them. Not that we are bound altogether to decline amusements and diversions, in which others are immoderate, unless example to them, or danger

* John vi. 27.

† Phil. iii. 20.

‡ Hos. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13. xii. 7.

** 1 Tim. iv. 3.

† 1 John ii. 15.

§ Eph. ii. 19

¶ Heb. iii. 1.

†† 1 Tim. vi. 17.

danger to ourselves, requires it: for their abuse doth not of necessity make our use of them unlawful, nor possibly sometimes unexpedient. Not that we are to measure the degree of our goodness by that of our austerities and abstinences: for if I may make a small change in the apostle's words, *neither if we eat not, are we the better; nor if we eat, are we the worse**. *The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost†*. Much less are we to censure persons of a free behaviour: for conscientious watchfulness is very consistent with an unconstrained appearance; and though *John* the Baptist, an excellent man, was rigid and strict; yet our blessed Lord, much the superior character, *came eating and drinking*, and conversed familiarly, as a friend, *with publicans and sinners‡*.

Again: in like manner we are to interpret the direction of *setting our affections on things above*. Not that we must keep, or strive to keep, our thoughts as intent upon them continually, as we possibly can: for neither our condition here, nor indeed our frame, will bear it; which wants daily relaxation as much as nightly rest; and without it, our spirits will be overcome, our health impaired, our temper soured; and, by consequence, more ground lost in our way to heaven than we hoped to gain. Not that we should doubt of our spiritual state, if the movements of our souls towards God and our delight in the contemplation of future happiness, be attended with but little warmth and passion; for, though strong religious feelings are perfectly rational, and extremely desirable, yet some tempers are moved but weakly by any thing; and what is present, and strikes our senses, will, on the whole, agitate most, if not all, of us more, than what is distant and natural. Still, if under these disadvantages, we so *love God as to keep his commandments§*, from reverent and thankful motives of duty to him, we give him that proof of our attachment, which he requires. Without this, the most fervent affections will be unavailable: and with this, the calmest, which are often the truest and most persevering, will be accepted. Nor, lastly, are men to despair on finding, that regard to a better world is not only, as an inward sentiment, much cooler, but,

* 1 Cor. viii. 8.

† Rom. xiv. 17.

‡ Matth. xi. 19. Luke vii. 34.

§ 1 John v. 34.

but, as a principle of action, much fainter than they have cause to wish; and the workings of earthly desires in their breasts powerful and vehement. For if the victory be obtained, the reward shall be in proportion to the toil of the combat. And though it be not a complete victory, yet if it be a real one, God may enable us to go on *from strength to strength*, till we are *in all things more than conquerors**. Or, at the worst, failings that will diminish our recompence, may by no means forfeit it.

But though a few, who are worthy of the utmost regard, have so peculiar a seriousness and tenderness of soul, that shewing them how gentle and mild in reality the seemingly severe doctrines of scripture are, is requisite, both to secure their peace and direct their conduct: yet the general propensity is much on the other side; and there is most need to fear, that when once the precepts on this head have been acknowledged to signify nothing impracticable or extreme, they will soon be overlooked, as if they signified scarce any thing at all. Now, it is possible to deceive ourselves with almost whatever imagination we will: but surely it is not easy to think that a slight duty, of which the word of God speaks in such terms, as you have already heard: in such declarations as that of St. *John*, *if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him*†, in such parables as that of the rich man, who, not indeed merely for enjoying this life, but for taking it as his portion, and looking no farther, was irreversibly doomed to the place of torment‡. We may very allowably, in our passage through the present world, both feel a complacency in the agreeableness of the road, and endeavour to procure good accommodations upon it: nay, by moderate attentions of this kind, prudently conducted, we may qualify ourselves the better, both for the business allotted us during our journey, and the employment for which we are designed at the conclusion of it. But if we turn aside into every flowery path, and engage in every pursuit that inclination suggests: if we forget we are travellers, consider our inns as places of abode, and adopt the land of our pilgrimage for our country: what shall we answer at the last to him, who hath sent us hither to do his work; limited the time for it; and given us the fullest warning, that

VOL. II.

Ff

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* Rem. viii. 37.

† 1 John ii. 15.

‡ Luke xvi. 19. &c.

our future condition depends on our present industry or negligence?

Let us reflect, therefore, whilst it may avail us, in what manner we are going on. The bulk of mankind, it is necessary, should spend their days in worldly labours. But then it is equally necessary, that these should be undertaken from a principle of religion, conducted suitably to the laws of religion, and accompanied with the practice of religious duties, public and private. They who plead want of leisure for devotion, can always find enough for follies and sins. They who plead want of capacity or instruction, have, the meanest of them, been taught and learnt the indispensable rules of life: to believe in their Creator, their Redeemer, their Sanctifier; to behave virtuously, love mankind, and honour God: doing which, they may offer up to him a life of the lowest occupations in sure faith of his acceptance. And if so much regard to things above be justly required even of these; what will be the case of their superiors, who voluntarily plunge themselves so deep, either in cares or pleasures, that he who made them *is not in all their thoughts**; or, if they cannot help sometimes remembering him, is indolently forgotten again, or studiously driven out? It is very true, business must be attended, but always in subordination to the one thing needful. Recreations must be allowed; but not so as to become the great end of our being. What proportion then do our employments of real consequences bear to our trifling ones: and what share, even of our serious hours, do we give to God, to improvement in virtue, to the contemplation of our latter end, to the hope of immortality? Too probably, much may be wanting to fit many of us for our final account. And how joyfully soever they who are conscious of their title to heaven, may partake of the innocent delights on earth: yet it is dreadful to see those, who must know, if they would reflect, their guilt to be unforgiven, and whose sentence, whatever they imagine, is possibly just ready to fall upon their heads, running round in a circle of thoughtless gaities, instead of applying with penitent humility for pardon and grace.

But,

* Pf. x. 4.

But, indeed, were the goodness of such examined, as are conceived by others and themselves to have a great deal, would it not prove to be solely or chiefly relative to this world? We do justice and speak truth: but is it from any better motive than reputation or convenience? We pity and relieve the sick and poor: but have we a like concern for the spiritual wants of men? We are chaste and temperate perhaps: but is it because *the pure in heart shall see God**, or to avoid expence, and disease, and disgrace? Our very sense of duty, is it of duty to the author of our beings; or do we not consider more, what we owe to ourselves, or other men, than what we owe to him? Our obligations to our fellow-creatures we acknowledge frequently; but, except it be in common a phrase, that comes now and then out of our mouths without attending to it; when do we express any thankfulness, any subjection, any relation at all, to the giver of every good gift? Or, if we have sentiments of this kind now and then, are they vigorous, or are they languid? We bestow, it may be freely, our money, our time, our pains, to gratify our fancies, or promote our interests, or serve our friends: what share of these do we employ to support the cause of religion, to advance the divine honour? Temporal disappointments fill us with the deepest sorrow: but do even transgressions, and especially do failings and imperfections in christian virtues, affect us in any degree approaching to it? And would not a considerable solicitude on such an account appear to some of us, who are far from thinking themselves void of religion, rather an evidence of a disordered mind, than a well-grounded concern? Prospects of temporal advantage elate us with the highest joy: do we experience equal satisfaction, though we ought to experience much greater, from the hopes of eternal blessedness? We are usually very ambitious of making as good a figure as we possibly can in our present state: what desire do we shew of obtaining an honourable distinction in the next? Instead of this, we seem careful to exclude all reflexion on future existence. When we speak of the death of an acquaintance, when we put the supposition of our own, how commonly do we consider it, as if nothing whatever were to follow after, and how seldom as an introduction to an infinitely more important life! Are we not indeed, some how or other,

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ashamed

* Matth. v. 8.

ashamed to mention, as if it were improper, our faith in a judgement to come, as a reason against sin, a motive to holiness, a support under affliction; or to acknowledge ourselves influenced by it in any one article of conduct? Or, if we do admit another state to suggest itself to us, perhaps we think more of hell with slavish terror, than of heaven with filial gratitude. Nay, even when we think of heaven, too commonly, if the truth were known, we have extremely faint wishes for it, or inclinations towards it. Yet, we can neither attain it, nor enjoy it, without loving it: and to love it indeed, we must love purity and benevolence, the company of good men, the worship of God: love to celebrate the praises of him that sits on the throne, and the Lamb at his right hand: to meditate on the mercy of our heavenly Father, the condescension and the glories of his eternal Son, the gracious inspirations of his Holy Spirit; our miserable condition by nature, our blessed one through the gospel of Christ, our prospect of improving in pious and virtuous affection to all eternity. Now these, it may be feared, are the things of all others, that the thoughts many of us dwell on least, and with the least satisfaction: yet we call ourselves christians, and hope to be saved.

Nor must it be denied, that great imperfection in spiritual desires may be consistent with a state of acceptance. But the farther such desires come short of their due vigour, the weaker evidence we shall have of what we are most concerned to know: the nearer they advance towards it, the greater will be our comfort and help from above; for *to him that bath, shall be given**: and though, from natural causes, they may sink, without danger, beneath what they once were, in sensible warmth, yet if their practical effects begin to lessen, it should be an alarming admonition, to *remember from whence we are fallen, and repent and do our first works†*; *to be watchful and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die‡*.

The methods to restore, to preserve and heighten our devout breathings towards *the Father of spirits§*, and the place of his abode, are these: that we appoint, and resolutely secure to ourselves frequent seasons for examining and rectifying those

* Matth. xiii. 12. † Rev. ii. 5. ‡ Ib. iii. 2. § Heb. xii. 9.

those wrong apprehensions of things which our own corrupt natures, the commerce of the world, and the suggestions of the wicked one are so apt to give us: that then we recollect the vanity, instability, and momentary duration, of every earthly good, the certainty of the unseen state, the eternal continuance of its joys and sufferings, the inseparable connexion of the one or the other with our present sentiments and behaviour; the authority and holiness of God, our own frailty, guilt, and weakness; the sacrifice and resurrection, the ascension and intercession, of our blessed Mediator; and when we have filled our souls with these great truths, lay open the workings of them before the Lord of all, in suitable confessions, petitions, and praises: that, if we find not at first the pleasure or the benefit we wish from such exercises, we persevere in them notwithstanding; yet so as not to let them become either on the one hand empty forms, or on the other unnecessary burthens; but employ them discreetly, as means to arrive at our end: that we assist our devotions and reflexions chiefly by the inimitable Spirit that breathes in the holy scriptures: but also by the use of other good books, and religious conversation, judiciously chosen: that we abstain conscientiously, as far as we can from every thing, of every sort, which we find hath a tendency to corrupt or deaden our hearts; but particularly that we shelter our tender piety from the blasts of scoffers with the utmost caution; indeed rather hide it from their knowledge, than expose it to their ridicule, yet never deny ourselves to be what we are: that we constantly attend the public service of God, not as a matter of custom or entertainment, but with a faithful care to join fervently in his worship, to learn meekly from his word, and cherish by reflexion afterwards whatever good impressions we have felt at the time: that we stately come to the holy table with due preparation, vow peculiarly, in partaking of it, *to live by the faith of the Son of God**; and, as we profess uniting ourselves to him by means of it, remember, that *he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit†*. Nor should we consider only the duty of being heavenly-minded, but also its advantages. We shall cease to fear death in proportion as we set our affections on what is to follow it; and *have hope as an anchor of the soul, sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that*

* Gal. ii. 20. † 1 Cor. vi. 17.

that within the veil, whither the fore-runner is entered for us. We shall scorn to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, if we have respect to the recompence of reward; bear whatever sufferings our christian obedience may expose us to, as seeing him, who is invisible†. We shall take joyfully the loss of worldly goods, knowing we have in heaven a better and an enduring substance‡. When we are deprived of our dearest friends, we shall refrain our voice from weeping, and our eyes from tears, for our work shall be rewarded, and they shall come again from the land of the enemy§. We shall run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, who endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God||. The more we contemplate him, the more we feel we love him, the more we shall consequently feel we are beloved by him. And when once we have tasted, that the Lord is gracious¶, we shall be filled with all joy and peace in believing, and abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost**, till we can say experimentally with the Psalmist, I am alway by thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and after that receive me with glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever††.*

* Heb. vi. 19, 20. † Ib. xi. 25, 26, 27. ‡ Ib. x. 34. § Jer. xxxi. 16.

¶ Heb. xii. 1, 2.

¶ 1 Pet. ii. 3.

** Rom. xv. 13.

†† Ps. lxxiii. 22,—25.

SERMON LXI.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS DISPENSATION IN THE OLD AND
NEW TESTAMENT.

I JOHN ii. 7, 8.

Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment, which ye had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word, which ye have heard from the beginning.

Again, a new commandment I write unto you: which thing is true in him and in you; because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.

THESE words contain a very useful piece of instruction, expressed in a manner somewhat obscure and enigmatical, on purpose to excite that attention, which they will soon reward by the discovery of their meaning. Probably they were designed to be more especially understood of the great precept, inculcated immediately after them, of universal goodwill: an original duty of mankind, but strangely forgotten throughout the earth, till our Saviour taught it more clearly, and enforced it more strongly, than had ever been done before. Yet they are equally applicable to the whole of christianity: and it might very well be the apostle's meaning to extend them so far, and set forth in them a truth, wonderfully fitted to give both a just and engaging notion of the gospel: that its general purpose is to make men happy, by restoring amongst them the belief and practice of the primitive universal religion of rational beings: and that its peculiar doctrines were all introduced by the change of human circumstances, and are the same in substance with those, of which the Patriarchs and Jews received imperfect notices, and typical representations in antient time: that being thus, in respect of God's early promulgation
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of it, an *old commandment* ; it was yet, with respect to the age in which our Saviour republished it, a *new one* ; as *darkness* had covered the word, which by his means was driven away ; and the light of truth displayed again, with a brightness and reviving warmth, till then unknown. For christianity added much evidence and distinctness to many important, and many comfortable articles of faith ; and then building on them the corresponding obligations of duty, completed on the old foundations a structure, only so far new as the state of mankind required it should be. This is, doubtless, an advantageous view of the christian dispensation ; representing it as doing for us exactly what we needed to have done ; and that it is likewise a just view of it, I shall endeavour to shew, by laying before you,

The nature of religion as it stood at first.

The condition of mankind afterwards : and

The fitness of the gospel to that condition.

The duty of man, so far as it was discoverable to him by reason, whilst he continued innocent, must consist in love, honour, and obedience, to his Maker, Benefactor, and Sovereign Lord, joined with the care of copying the divine goodness in his behaviour to his fellow-creatures, and the divine holiness in the rational government of himself. It is plain, that he could be obliged to no more, unless God was pleased, by revelation, to superadd more ; and as plain, that he was obliged to the whole of this. For to pretend reverence to our Father in heaven, yet to misuse his children and our brethren on earth ; or to behave with affection, dutifulness and gratitude amongst them, and yet shew none to him ; and to profess both a righteous and godly life, yet to fail of the obligations of a sober one, contradicting and debasing reason by brutal excesses and irregularities, is evidently faulty and inconsistent. The same regard to truth and right, which requires any of these things, requires them all. So that neither piety and morals can be separated from each other, nor any part of either from the rest : but the whole hath one foundation ; and is indeed one temper of mind, only exerted towards different objects. In this happy rectitude of heart and behaviour, consists the image of God, the perfection of man, the original religion of all creatures, capable of religion, throughout the universe.

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Supposing, therefore, any creature fallen from this blessed state, restoring him to it again must be the only ultimate end to which any useful endeavours of his own, or any gracious designs of heaven for his good, can be directed. Now, this is our case. We are fallen, by the fault of our first parents transgressing an easy revealed commandment, superadded very justly to their natural ones, as a further trial of their obedience; we are fallen, I say, thus from uprightness of nature and immortality: and we feel convincing effects of that melancholy change. We are also fallen by our own fault, lower still, from personal innocence into personal guilt; and from this condition we want to be recovered. But that we cannot be, nor desire to be, till we are sensible of our misery and danger, and sorry for the sins that have reduced us to so wretched a condition. Here then begins the necessity of repentance: a duty for which there was no room in the primitive state of things; but in ours, the ground-work of all that we have to hope for. And this duty comprehends, not only that we condemn ourselves of folly, for having acted contrary to our interests; and of baseness, for having violated the dictates of our inward sense of virtue; but of ill desert in disobeying God. The grief and shame attending repentance will vary in their expression, according to the variety of mens natural constitutions. But disapprobation of sin, and care of amendment, are necessary proofs of its genuineness. And to these the offender is absolutely bound, how small soever his hope of pardon may be. For having done amiss can, in no circumstances, justify the neglect of doing better: and every increase of guilt must be expected to increase the punishment.

But still, as our spirit and vigour in acting will be proportionable to the encouragement on which we act; without some good prospect of forgiveness and acceptance, men would have so little heart to go through the difficulties of reformation, that scarce any regard to religion would be preserved in the world. And therefore God hath enabled us, by the mere use of reason, to conclude it probable, that as goodness is always the object of his favour, so whenever we return to it really, though imperfectly, he will look on us anew, with tenderness and complacence. *For like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him: for he knoweth our frame,*

*he remembereth that we are but dust**. But then, whether it be consistent with the holiness of his nature, and the honour of his government, that repentance should obtain pardon in all cases, or in which: and whether in any, without some admonitory and exemplary correction first; and how severe such correction may be; though it nearly concerns us, who can say, unless knowledge be given him from above?

Another point, of greater importance to fallen and sinful man, is this. Partly by the original depravation of our nature, partly by our actual transgressions, the strength of the human mind is grievously weakened, and we find in ourselves a sad inability of doing, what yet we know we ought to do, and were made for, and cannot become happy without doing. Now what shall relieve us here? When indeed we contemplate God's continual providence and care, even over the meanest of his works, and reflect that the improvement of his rational creatures in piety and virtue must be the principal end of his creation; we cannot but hope, that he will condescend to assist us in it; inspire us with good purposes, and direct and strengthen us in the execution of them. But still hope is not certainty: and the weaker our hope is, the fainter will our efforts be: and whether, after great and habitual sins, we may promise ourselves the aid of his spirit at all, though then we need it most, reason cannot judge on any certain grounds.

A third most material article, on which it throws a little light, but a light greatly overcast with clouds and doubts, is that of a future state. Considering the immortal nature of man's soul, the evident capacity it hath for much higher degrees of knowledge and virtue, than it ever attains here: and the earnest desires of a future being, which the wisest and best men feel beyond others: considering the many miseries to which we are subject in this life, the few and low enjoyments of which we are capable, and the strange disproportion with which both are divided; while the good too frequently suffer every thing that is terrible for the sake of their goodness: and the bad very commonly obtain the utmost prosperity by the means of their wickedness: men have never failed in any age of the world to entertain some expectation of a better and more equal state hereafter. But how long or how short its duration will be, how great or how small its rewards, and what qualifications

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* Psal. ciii. 13, 14.

will intitle us to any, and what share of them; our unassisted faculties only guess: and the subject appears in a very great measure to lie out of our reach.

But the divine mercy gave additional hopes to men from the very beginning, beyond what reason was able to furnish; with useful, though general and obscure, intimations of the means, by which these hopes were to be accomplished. Our first parents were told, that the *seed of the woman should bruise the head*, and destroy the power, of that *serpent**, which had brought into the world sin and death. Sacrifices were accepted, as early as the days of *Abel*. *Enoch*, for his piety, though undoubtedly not a faultless one, was translated to a happier life. *Noah* was assured, that the *spirit of God strove with men*†, to reform them. And these reviving truths, possibly with many more circumstances and evidences of them, were certainly propagated amongst all *Noah's* children: of which there remain clear and numerous footsteps in the following ages.

But by degrees negligence and wickedness introduced ignorance and superstition: and these in their turn augmented negligence and wickedness: till the patriarchal doctrines were forgotten or perverted; the spiritual worship of God laid aside for idolatry; and his nature and perfections so grossly misunderstood, that it is no wonder if pardon of sins, assistance in right conduct, and a recompence after death, were either not thought of, or expected on conditions absurd, and even immoral. For the knowledge of the commonest duties of life was in many cases utterly lost; and shocking crimes considered as perfectly lawful, nay exalted into acts of religion. Thus then did the nations of the earth, to speak in the language of *St. Paul*, *walk in the vanity of their minds, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God*‡.

Suppose now any one to have made it his business, in this lamentable state of things, to teach men their duty to God, their fellow-creatures, and themselves; and to have given them only such instructions in it, with such hopes of acceptance and recompence, as the mere light of nature could afford; what a publisher of good tidings, what a noble benefactor to

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mankind,

* Gen. iii. 15.

† Ib. vi. 3.

‡ Eph. iv. 17, 18.

mankind, would such a one have been ! And had he further appointed a number of his followers to travel through every land, combat the reigning errors and follies, establish the truth in their stead, and settle a succession of men to support it for ever ; how highly would the institution, and the author of it, have been honoured by the well-disposed throughout the earth ! But no person appeared, who had either abilities to execute, or greatness of mind to conceive, so vast and excellent a design. The founders, lawgivers, and rulers, of kingdoms and commonwealths, if they studied the temporal welfare of those under their care, for which they often provided very injudiciously, had little farther regard even to their morals, and to their religion scarce any at all : but patronized and set up whatever form of it, either the people were accustomed to observe ; or their own fancy, or the example of their neighbours, happened to suggest. So that there was not, for many ages, in all the known countries of the Gentile world, a single instance of rational public worship of the true God. Then for the philosophers ; most of them spent the chief of their time in speculations, that had small connexion with virtue and piety. And they who did turn their minds to examine into the obligations and the hopes of men, had very imperfect, very erroneous, notions of both ; tolerated, and even applauded, great sins ; had scarce any notion at all, either of inward humility, or of repentance towards God ; were very wavering, to say no worse, in their belief of future rewards ; and had yet less apprehensions of future punishments. Besides, they differed from one another in most material points, but all agreed in conforming to whatever false worship was established : and, had they held more truth than they did, were so little regarded, in any thing right, by the generality of their fellow-citizens ; that they confined their discourses to a small number of their private disciples, and left the multitude to live and die like the beasts that perish. This undeniably was, and had long been, the case, when christianity appeared. And though human reason might have taught men more than it did ; yet they, whom it did not, were never the better for that possibility : nor was there any likelihood of its becoming fact.

Such was the condition of the Gentiles. That of the *Jews* in the mean time was very different, but became at length almost

most as bad. They had received, from their ancestor *Abraham*, further notices of God's gracious intentions. They had received, from their legislator *Moses*, a great blessing, an authorized written system of true religion and moral virtue; with additional precepts, to preserve them from idolatry, separate them from the nations that professed it, and exhibit to them a more particular, but dark, representation of good things to come, which would naturally engage their attention and expectation all along; and, being explained when God saw fit, would show, that the purpose, which he executed in latter times, he had formed in the earliest. After this, they received from a long succession of prophets, ampler and more spiritual instructions, fuller assurances of God's forgiveness and grace, clearer notifications of a future state, and more circumstantial accounts of an extraordinary person to arise from the family of *David*, by whom all the divine blessings were to be conveyed to all the world, on the condition of believing and obeying him.

These undoubtedly were great advantages. Yet for a long time, notwithstanding them all, they were continually associating idols with the true God, and even the vilest parts of heathen worship with his. And when they came to profess a stricter adherence to their own religion, they grievously perverted the most essential articles of it. They worked themselves into a hatred of other nations, against whom they were indeed commanded to be on their guard, but still to love them. They promised themselves a temporal deliverer, to establish for their benefit an universal kingdom of this world, instead of one to free them from sin and death. They neglected the weightier, the moral parts of their law; and grew so minutely and absurdly observant of the ceremonial, that at length they imagined, their whole duty to God consisted in outward forms; by a scrupulous practice of which they conceited themselves to merit every thing from him, without any one good quality within.

When therefore the wisdom of the wisest nations had proved foolishness, and the piety of the best instructed sadly degenerated into superstition, our heavenly Father mercifully and seasonably sent forth his Son, to renew *the old commandment which was in the beginning*, to perfect those additions to
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it which the alteration of human circumstances had required, and perpetuate the knowledge of the whole to the end of time.

That the ultimate design of christianity is re-establishing the love of God, the love of men, the love of virtue, is obviously plain from the whole New Testament: particularly, from our Saviour's sermon on the mount; from his answer to the question, *which is the great commandment in the law**: from St. James's declaration, what is *pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father†*: from St. Paul's discourse to the *Athenians*: from his observation, that *love is the end of the commandment‡*: from his explicit assertion, that the *grace of God appeared* for this purpose, to *teach all men, that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world, looking for the glorious hope§* of a better. And the re-establishment, which the gospel hath made in this respect, is perfect. It requires such love of God, as will incline us effectually to imitate, as well as honour him; such love of men, as extends to the whole world, and seeks both the temporal and the spiritual good of all; such love of virtue, as is free from ostentation, from austerity, from self-opinion. It lays us under a necessity of remembering, that we are frail, that we are sinners; and therefore most firmly bound to humility in our own hearts, mildness towards others, penitence in the sight of God. To those who are in any degree thus disposed, it not only repeats the obscurer, yet instructive and comfortable, intimations, of pardon, grace, and reward; which the patriarchal ages enjoyed, *as a light, shining faintly in a dark place||*; and which after-times lost, and wandered on in the thickest night: but it visits men like *the day-spring from on high*, close followed by the sun of righteousness beaming forth to cheer our hearts, and *guide our feet into the way of peace¶*. Instead of the shadows and figures of the *Mosaic law*, which veiled, and, in a great measure, concealed, what they exhibited; it presents us with the undisguised truth and very substance: sets before our eyes that great atonement to the justice of heaven, which other victims were appointed to pre-

signify;

* Matth. xxii. 36.

† 1 Tim. i. 5.

‡ 2 Pet. i. 19.

§ James i. 27.

¶ Tit. ii. 11, 12, 13.

¶ Luke i. 78, 79.

signify; and opens the whole treasure of divine bounty; free forgiveness, kind assistance, eternal happiness, to the worst of sinners, on the equitable, the advantageous terms of ingenuous sorrow, thankful faith, and universal, though still imperfect, obedience. *Come every one that thirsteth, come to the waters of life, and buy without money and without price**. Instead of a heavy yoke of ceremonial restraints, and rigorous observances unexplained, necessary for the immature and injudicious age of the *Jewish* dispensation; God hath considered christians as grown up to a manly capacity of rational service, and fuller knowledge of his counsels. He hath therefore communicated to us a much greater number of doctrinal truths, all fitted to instruct our worship, and inflame our gratitude: but hath reduced our ritual performances to two: both of them clear and important in their meaning; easy and affecting in their use, and fully guarded against being esteemed beyond their use: first, baptism, which most aptly signifies our engagements to preserve ourselves from the defilement of sin, and God's promise to look on us as free from the guilt of it; then the holy Eucharist; which, with equal propriety, expresses our Saviour's giving his body to be broken, and his blood to be shed, for the sake of man; and our being nourished, and strengthened, and united, to him for ever, by imbibing and digesting his doctrine, and receiving into our souls, by faith, the beneficial influences of his death.

Thus then the *new commandment*, delivered by our blessed Lord, is an authentic republication, both of the primitive religion of man before the fall, and of the additional instructions given him after it; with such improvements of these last, as make up, together with the former, a complete institution of piety, fitted to answer all our necessities to the world's end. To prevent or detect any corruptions or mistakes in so important a system of doctrine, the blessed Author of it hath provided, that we should have the very words, in which he delivered it, recorded in the gospels; and his true meaning confirmed, and further explained, in the writings of his immediate disciples: which inestimable treasure providence hath watched over through every age: and, by its assistance, the

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* Isa. lv. i.

old commandment hath once in these latter days been rescued from dangerous perversions, and happily restored to its original purity.

But besides, he hath made yet another provision for securing, not only the genuine belief, but the faithful practice of it. As man is a social creature, and capable of receiving at least as much benefit from uniting in religion, as in other things: so he hath formed his followers into a spiritual society, or church; to celebrate the worship of God more solemnly, and bear a public testimony to his truths; to exhort, and *provoke one another to love and good works**; to *restore in the spirit of meekness them that are overtaken in faults†*, but *put away from amongst them the grossly and obstinately wicked‡*; that, if possible, the reverence of so awful a censure may bring them to recollect themselves and repent; or, supposing it fails, that yet the innocence of the rest, and the honour of the christian name, may be preserved. And that all this may be performed in a due manner, he hath instituted a regular subordination and succession of *pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of the body of Christ §*. An appointment evidently suitable, both to the nature of a being, which so greatly wants instruction and admonition, as man; and to the nature of a religion, that will so very well bear to be shewn in a full light. However defectively, therefore, or wrongly, this institution may be administered through our faults; or how much soever it may be despised, or obstructed, through yours; yet, in itself, it is visibly of excellent use; and, which is remarkable, peculiar to the religion delivered in scripture. For, in the Gentile world, through many centuries, we have no one instance of any public teaching, much less any moral discipline, attending their worship. And indeed when *Julian* attempted to set up preachers of heathenism, in opposition to those of christianity, it was immediately foretold him, and the event verified the prediction, that what had proved so effectual to establish truth, would only serve to expose and ruin error.

Such then being the nature of our holy religion, and such the methods taken to preserve it from corruption, and make it

* Heb. x. 24, 25.

† 1 Cor. v. 13.

† Gal. vi. 1.

§ Eph. iv. 11, 12.

it a perpetual instrument of present and eternal happiness to mankind; whoever sincerely honours God, loves his fellow-creatures, or wishes well to his own soul, must see and feel himself deeply concerned to embrace and respect the gospel of *Christ*; which God cannot have revealed for such noble purposes, and left any one at liberty to slight a single part of it. But then we must remember, that neither professing nor admiring it, will serve for any thing but our condemnation; unless we *receive it unto an honest and good heart**, and bring forth the fruits of it in pious and virtuous lives. *Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doth righteousness, is righteous: he that committeth sin, is of the devil. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil †; and hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments‡.*

* Mark iv. 20. Luke viii. 15. † 1 John iii. 7, 8. ‡ 1 John ii. 3.

S E R M O N LXII.

THE TENDENCY OF THE SPIRIT OF THE GOSPEL, AND ITS
MISERABLE PERVERSION BY HUMAN DEPRAVITY.

MATTH. X. 34.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth ; I came not to send peace, but a sword.

THAT these words of our blessed Saviour express, not the design of his appearing in the world, but the effect it would have very contrary to his design, through the wickedness of men, both his life and doctrine sufficiently shew : and, indeed, all sorts of men have acknowledged. For though too many Christians have acted as if they understood him to desire what he only foretels, and thought it their duty to make his words good : yet none of them, I think, have ever professed to understand him so. And infidels themselves have done him the justice of allowing, that he meant to establish good-will and virtue among men. But then his religion, they say, hath so miserably failed of answering his purpose, hath produced such dreadful evils, and been of so exceeding small benefit, that they cannot imagine a wise and good being, as God is, would ever take such very extraordinary methods as the gospel asserts, to introduce and establish it. And though few, it may be hoped, will think it reasonable to carry the matter thus far : yet many may be tempted by such confident affirmations, if not to doubt of the truth of christianity, yet to have less delight in it, less thankfulness and zeal for it, than they would otherwise have.

We shall do well, therefore, to enquire, both how far the facts alledged in this objection are true, and whether the conclusion drawn from them is just.

That considerable evils have taken their rise from our Saviour's doctrine, must be owned. He himself, we see, declares they

they would : and he had reason to declare it in terms as strong, as the truth would warrant. For as the *Jews* expected nothing but peace and prosperity, for themselves at least, under their *Messiah*, it was both honourable and prudent to give them fair warning of what was to happen, that they might not first be elevated with false hopes, and heated into presumptuous behaviour, and then complain they had been deceived and misled. Besides, as he undoubtedly thought the least degree of evil a great deal too much, he could not speak slightly of that which he foresaw. But still he could never design to say, that it would over-balance or go near to equal the good : for thus he might have discredited his own mission, and contradicted the whole tenour of his own discourses.

The allegations, therefore, of the argument before us cannot be proved from this text, nor, indeed, from any other. But the whole proof must be drawn from the natural tendency of christianity, and the experience of its effects. Now it cannot, consistently with common modesty, be denied, that the tendency of christianity to the welfare of mankind is very powerful. Justice and mercy, obedience to superiors, condescension to inferiors, mutual tenderness and mutual usefulness, are the main precepts that every where occur in it : to these peculiarly the reward of everlasting happiness is annexed ; and nothing contrary to them is ever taught throughout the scripture. It is very true, pleas have been made from it in support of tyranny and cruelty ; but they are so absolutely groundless, that unbelievers themselves have vindicated our religion in this respect, by charging it on those whom they apprehend to claim exorbitant powers, that they assumed what their own sacred books did not give them the least colour for.

Nor indeed do I remember any accusation against the gospel, as hurtful in its nature, at all worth notice, excepting that of the great stress it is said to lay on right belief : from whence, we are told, all who imagine each other to believe amiss have been prompted to reciprocal hatred and persecution ; whereas, the heathens had no articles of faith, and therefore lived in peace *. But indeed every profession, both of religion and irreligion, must have some belief to ground itself upon : else it

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will

* See Letter to the Minister of *Mosfat*, p. 7, and the Answer to it.

will be a profession of nothing. Deists, and even Atheists, have their creed; consisting, as they would find upon inquiry, of much stranger doctrines than ours doth: which also they believe to be of vast importance, otherwise they would be self-condemned for propagating it. Nay, if we may judge of what many of them would do, by the spirit they manifest in what they say; as they inveigh against christianity now both with bitterness and unfairness, they would employ against it, if they had power, violence as well as fraud *. Then, as for the heathens, whose mildness in these matters is so extolled; both *Jews* and *Christians* had most dreadful experience of their want of it. Nor were they by any means totally guiltless of religious quarrels among themselves. Nor hath the gospel given the least encouragement to such quarrels by the faith it requires. So much faith it must require, as may be a foundation for the duties it enjoins. But all unnecessary speculations it condemns in the fullest and strongest terms. Be mens faith ever so right, it tells them plainly they shall never be rewarded, without every part of a good life: and be their faith ever so wrong, it neither permits unkind usage of them in this world nor harsh judgement with respect to another. There are, indeed, awful denunciations in the bible, against such as corrupt the gospel, *turn the grace of God into lasciviousness* †, or abuse it to patronize any kind of immorality. But nothing severe is ever said of well-meaning persons that mistake; nor any thing more severe of bad men that err in opinion, than of bad men that do not. Nor can there be stricter injunctions against any thing, or enforced with better arguments, than those of *Christ* and his apostles against all sorts of persecution. So that had they established ever so many articles of faith, and laid ever so much weight upon them, yet as they have certainly laid equal weight at least on brotherly love, mutual forbearance, and universal charity: they can never have authorized doing any harm in the world. And the religion they taught is confessedly fitted to do all the good in it, which the purest precepts, and the strongest inducements to practise them, the most regular care to instruct men, and the most friendly discipline to watch over them, are capable of.

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* See *Leland* against *Tindal*, Vol. I. p. 302—312.

† Jude 4.

Yet some, notwithstanding, will insist, that in fact it hath done harm: and against fact there is no arguing. But, in the nature of things, nothing can do what it hath no manner of tendency to do. Christianity therefore may have been the pretence, may have been the occasion, of evil; but the cause it cannot. However, let us enquire, what the proof is of its having any way occasioned near so much harm, as it hath directly produced good. We readily confess, a long catalogue may with ease be given of the sins and sufferings that have followed its appearance and establishment. In the first place, its professors underwent grievous persecutions from the rest of mankind. But evidently this is no more to be charged upon christianity, than the injuries which the wicked have often done to the good, on account of their goodness, are to be charged on moral virtue. In the next place, the *Jews*, having offended God by their inhuman treatment of the gospel, were permitted, by his just providence, to turn the same bitter spirit against each other, and against the *Romans*, and so to bring on themselves utter destruction. But here also christianity is perfectly clear, unless it be an innocent man's fault, that a criminal is punished for having robbed or murdered him. And these things it probably was that our Saviour had chiefly in view, when he spoke in the text of *a sword to be sent on the earth*; or, as perhaps, it should be translated, *on the land*, the country of *Judea*.

But, we must acknowledge farther, discord and divisions prevailed very soon among christians also, and produced lamentable effects: till they came at length to exercise barbarities one towards another, equal to any they had suffered from infidels. But then it ought to be allowed us in return, that though unjust spiritual censures began even in the second century, and the low degrees of temporal persecution, such as banishment and confiscation, in the fourth, very soon after they had power: yet the utmost extremities were introduced much later, nor did they receive the formal sanction of the supreme authority, till many ages after. I believe twelve hundred years had passed, before any law was made in any christian state for putting men to death on account of erroneous faith. Since that time, indeed, most shocking tragedies have been acted by a wicked zeal for religion. But then many, that have seemed to proceed from that cause, were but the real truth known, would in all
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likelihood be found, and indeed often have been found, to proceed from quite other motives. Interests and resentments have been covered perpetually with a mask of piety. Zealots have often been only the instruments of parties, while they seemed to be their directors; and the mischief, done in the name of God, would have been as certainly done without it under some other pretence, if that had not offered itself. Religion is a specious plea; and therefore was used whenever it could: but any plea will serve for what men are bent to do. And if the mischiefs that have been disguised under a form of godliness, could not in some cases have been so easily or effectually accomplished else: yet the whole of them ought not to be attributed even to the pretence of piety; but only so much as would not have happened, had not that been used. Religious animosities, religious wars, have been frequent and dreadful. But can we imagine, that if these had been avoided, no others would have arisen, during all the time that they have filled? Such a notion would argue strange ignorance of human nature. So that in ages when the world hath appeared to suffer very much from the abuses of religion, it may indeed have suffered very little from them. And of what it hath suffered, one great part may have proceeded, not from the bigotry of believers, but the artifices of such as were inwardly unbelievers.

But besides the evil of discord, christianity hath been accused of obstructing knowledge, and promoting ignorance in the world*. But in what condition was the world before christianity? Did not the grossest ignorance, about matters of the highest importance to men, prevail almost every where, even in the politest and best instructed nations? And if the succeeding times were not learned, what else could be expected; when the *Roman* empire debased and sunk under tyranny and luxury, before it received the gospel, was soon after dissolved by that inundation of barbarians that overspread *Europe* with war and desolation? By these heathens it was that arts and sciences were brought so low. What remained of learning, remained among christians: and as they became christians, they shared in it. Little was left indeed. But had it not been for the professors, and particularly the teachers of this religion, to
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* That christianity hath not been hurt by the increase of knowledge, see Warburton, Vol. II. Sermon. xv.

which some would impute all the darknes of the middle ages, every monument of ancient days must probably have been lost *. Christians they were too, and principally clergymen, that have restored and improved learning since; and the christian world is at this day the seat of it. Nor will the unbelievers amongst us, I am persuaded, pretend that, what they have contributed to make it so, is at all material in comparison, or presume to mention the names of their few and arrogant leaders in competition with the multitudes of truly great men, who have adorned the faith of *Christ* by their distinguished excellence in every branch of philosophy and literature. Indeed learning is of such eminent service, both to the understanding and the proof of our religion, that we must of necessity support it. And accordingly, more are bred up to learning with a view of being dedicated to the ministry of the gospel, than with any other whatever. Few of them, in proportion, we own, make great improvements: but few in any profession do. And preserving thus, though it be but a moderate degree of knowledge, amongst men, cannot fail to be exceedingly useful; especially of that knowledge which immediately relates to their moral conduct. But were infidelity once to prevail, the chief inducements to all applications of this sort would cease: scarce any one would take the pains to learn, what it would be no one's peculiar duty to teach; worldly pursuits and sensual indulgences, having little to check them, would almost wholly engross the attention of mankind; and produce not only a neglect, but a contempt, of more liberal studies; as I fear we have begun to experience already.

But we shall be told, that how little harm, or how much service soever, christianity may have done to learning; it hath contributed nothing to the virtue or happiness of mankind, and therefore cannot be a religion worthy of God. Now, on the contrary, we apprehend, it hath contributed to both these very greatly: and it seems the extremity of unreasonableness to say, that, in spite of all its precepts, promises and threatenings, it can make multitudes bad, and yet by the force of them all can make no one good. There is visibly no possibility that either better rules of life should be given, or more interesting motives

* The religious orders established in the 11th century revived learning in the 12th. See *Journ. des Sc.* July, 1744. p. 317.

motives to observe them, than the gospel hath given. It must therefore reform those, whom any doctrine can: and the only objection against it on this head must be, that it doth not reform those whom no doctrine can.

Still it will be said; look into the history of christian nations, into that of the christian clergy in particular; and what will you find, but the same wrong inclinations and wrong behaviour, in at least the same degree as amongst other men? And it must be owned, the professors of the gospel in general, but the ministers of it above all, (because, though on the whole we have by no means been worse, yet we ought to have been far better than the rest) have much cause to be humble before God and the world for the dishonour we have done by our negligence, our sensuality, our haughtiness, our ambition, our covetousness, our unfairness, our bitterness, to the worthy and holy name whereby we are called. But as to the degree of these faults, it should be observed, that if sins and follies make the chief figure in christian histories, so they do and must in all histories. Virtuous and quiet times, be they ever so long, virtuous and quiet men, be they ever so many, furnish usually but slender materials for a narration, and fill up but a small space in it; whereas great notice is taken of the bad things that are done in the world, partly from a natural dislike of wickedness, partly from personal hatred to some of those who commit it, and partly also from the pleasure men have in framing comparisons advantageous to themselves. But especially the failings of such as lie under peculiar obligations of being pious and exemplary, will always be seen in the very strongest light, and blame thrown upon them beyond all proportion, when they act amiss. But when men act well, and things go on right, very little is said. The good do not proclaim their own goodness: and the world is seldom very inquisitive about it; hath other matters to mind; thinks at the most they do but their duty, and is much apter to seek for, and imagine faults, than to own and remember virtues.

In the primitive times, when few were tempted to profess the faith of *Christ* but such as embraced it in earnest, and his disciples were easily distinguished from the rest of mankind, the fruits of the gospel bore a most convincing testimony in its favour. But when once the profession grew general, and profitable: when real and pretended christians were mixed together, and the virtues hid amongst the immoral, no wonder if
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then the benefit was less remarkable. The whole promiscuous collection going all under one name, and many of them seeming but little the better for their faith, both partial and careless observers have hastily concluded that few or none are the better at all. And yet, there are great numbers on the whole, much greater than either the profane are ready to think, or even the pious have commonly the means of knowing, whose hearts and lives their belief hath wonderfully amended: some of good dispositions raised by it to eminent goodness: others of bad dispositions excited to resist them effectually. And how much the influence of religious principles and religious persons, whom our Saviour calls the *salt of the earth**, may contribute to preserve even the bad part of mankind from utter corruption and dissolution, is not perhaps often sufficiently considered.

But were it true, though it neither is nor can be, that the virtuous would be equally virtuous without the precepts, without the promises, without the grace of the gospel: yet there is no pretence, that they would be equally happy too. For the christian doctrine is adapted throughout in the highest degree to support them under the difficulties of duty, and the afflictions of life, by such assurances, as reason unassisted can never give, that God will pardon, strengthen, and reward them, both here and to eternity. Possibly to some this may seem at present a small matter. But there will come a time, may it come before it be too late! when they will be sensible, that these are the most important of all things.

It must not be objected, that believers in the gospel are often full of doubts and terrors. For believers in natural religion alone have infinitely more cause for them, as both their rule and their hopes are infinitely more obscure. Nor must it be argued, that if christianity adds to the happiness of the virtuous here, it adds also to the uneasiness of the vicious: for they ought to be uneasy for the world's sake and their own. It may force them to grow better; if not, it may restrain them from growing worse: at least, sooner or later, it may bring them back, in part, if not wholly; and thus prevent an unknown quantity of evils, which else they would suffer, and make those around them suffer. So that, indeed,

one person, where the gospel is at all understood, can well fail to be in some respect a gainer by it. And be its good influence ever so small on each singly, yet the sum total must be very large. It is soon said in an angry mood, that religion doth no good; for the world cannot be worse than it is. But consider a little what the face of things would be, were the forming hand of christian education to cease from its work, and the continual warnings of christian instruction to be laid aside. Nothing could be substituted comparable to them: Nothing would be substituted at all. Attempts for it, if they were made, which probably they might not be in haste, would be disunited and inconsistent, disregarded and successless: all persons would be left in a great measure, and the lower and larger part intirely, to the guidance of appetites and passions grown up wild, with a very poor mixture of a reason uninformed, and more likely to be subservient and do mischief, than govern and do good.

Nor have they alone, who profess christianity, been made wiser and better by it, but others also. The chief part of what is valuable in the *Mahometan* religion, which hath spread exceedingly wide, is probably derived from the Old and New Testament. And certainly the unbelievers amongst ourselves, who would fain represent revelation as useless, have, notwithstanding, borrowed from it those rational notions of piety and virtue, which they pretend to be the natural growth of their own understandings. For few or none of the most learned of their heathen predecessors had them: but scarce the most ignorant of their christian contemporaries are without them.

Nor should we consider only what good the gospel hath done in other respects, but how much superstition particularly it hath extinguished or prevented. The superstitions it hath occasioned, we are continually told of: but many seem to have forgot those it found in the world; the most absurd and abject, the most expensive and troublesome, the most immoral and barbarous, that could be. And none were more cruel, or upheld by more dreadful church-tyranny, than those of the *Druids* in this nation. Now who can say, how long any of these might have continued; who can say, how much worse they might have become, and have been at this day, if christianity had not rooted them out? The very grossest corruptions
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of it, afterwards, were not quite so bad as those preceeding enormities. Besides, in many countries, but in none more completely than our own, the reformation of it hath driven out those abuses, which the perversion of it brought in: and it continually bears testimony against them, wherever the scripture is freely read. Superstition is by no means an effect of religion, but a natural weakness in the human mind, to which it may be greatly subject even without religion. The gospel was intended to destroy it: the clergy are intended for a standing guard against it: and though too much of it still prevails among christians, yet very much more prevails in all the rest of the world.

Taking therefore into our view the whole benefit of the scripture-revelation, both what it hath effected, and what it hath hindered: had it been the pretence or the occasion for all the harm that is alledged, it may yet have been the direct cause of unspeakably more good: and nothing can be unfairer, than attending only to one side of the account, instead of both. Indeed to state both exactly, or make any balance approaching towards accuracy, is utterly impossible, where so vast a number of things and circumstances, through so large a part of the world and so long a succession of ages, must come in before a judgement can be formed. Every one may assert as boldly as he will to the disadvantage of christianity. But to prove the assertion from fact must be insuperably difficult. And when facts cannot be sufficiently ascertained and compared, the presumption will always be a very just and strong one, that every thing hath produced those effects chiefly, which its natural tendency fits it to produce. Now the good tendency of christianity no candid and considerate reasoner will ever dispute.

But one objection farther hath been raised, that how difficult soever it may be to judge of a series of past times, yet the consequences of introducing the gospel into heathen nations in our own times may be judged of: and we have imparted it to none, but we have made them worse than we found them. Now supposing this dreadful imputation true, is it by teaching them our religion that we have corrupted them, or by teaching them sins absolutely inconsistent with our religion? Had they learned our christianity without our debauchery, which is surely no part of it, their condition had been infinitely bet-

ter than it was before : and had they learned our debauchery without our christianity, it had been still worse than it is now.

Nor doth this observation hold with respect to them only, but ourselves too. We compare the present christian times, in which numberless incentives to luxury and all manner of wickedness abound, with the ancient heathen ones, when the poverty and simplicity of their manner of life secured them from adding artificial, to their natural, vices : and in whatever we find or imagine ourselves worse than them, we ascribe it to our religion. Whereas the true method of comparing is, to take a luxurious heathen nation ; *Rome* under its emperors for instance ; and a luxurious christian one ; and then see where crimes will appear to be most general, and carried farthest : only making due allowance for one thing, that the sins and follies we are offended at in our own age, will look greater, because they are present ; and yet the virtues of those we live amongst will seem less, because love to ourselves will tempt us to depreciate those, with whom we shall be most compared.

But supposing it ever so questionable, what good, or ever so clear what harm, hath proceeded from christianity ; how are we justified in doubting on that account, whether its origin be from God ? Think only of how little benefit reason hath been to a great part of mankind : how much uneasiness it hath caused, by enabling them to reflect on their own disadvantages, dangers, and sufferings ; how much mischief it hath brought to pass, by qualifying them to contrive and execute ill designs against each other ; how much wiser and better many brutes are, than many men : yet doth not reason proceed from God ? Again, what innumerable evils in all ages and countries, have civil governors been the authors of ? The abuses of christianity cannot have produced so much evil, as the abuses of temporal power, because they have not extended near so far. Yet is not society and civil government from God ! Indeed if nothing could be from him, but what in the event is an advantage to us ; we must deny that the very being of many persons is derived from him : for too many doubtless had better never have been. The good, which he intends absolutely and unconditionally, nothing can hinder : but where he intends only to afford men the means of being
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happy if they will, he must leave it in their choice to be otherwise: and what he doth for them, is not the less worthy of him, because they are so unworthy, as to dispise or turn it against themselves. For never sure was it made an argument against the value of a medicine, that they who neglect to take it, or who mix poison with it, are not the better for it. Whoever will give religion leave to do him good, will always be an evidence of its usefulness. And it is extremely hard, to have those alledge against us that there are but few such, who are continually endeavouring that there may be none; and impute that wickedness of the world to the want of efficacy in christianity, which is so very much owing to their own profane discourse and licentious examples.

But farther: the gospel-scheme is not completed yet; and the good it hath not done, it may do still. It hath subsisted indeed a number of years, that seems a large one, and sufficient to shew whatever is to be expected from it. But large and small are comparative terms: and what proportion its duration hitherto may bear to that which it hath to come, or how differently the power of God may be exerted in its favour hereafter from what it is now, we none of us know. But this we know certainly, that the original books in which it is contained, published at its first appearance, foretold both its past and present corruptions, and its future purity and universal happy fruits. The former of these predictions, that christianity should be made an instrument of tyranny and superstition, bloodshed and dissoluteness, was a very amazing one: a thing which neither any sagacity could have foreseen, nor any enthusiast have believed; nor any impostor would have declared, if he had believed it. And therefore the fact, joined with the prophecy of it, far from an objection, is a proof of our religion; and shews us to be in the midst of an event; the melancholy part of which having been so remarkably signified to us before-hand, we ought by no means to judge of what will follow as we should in a common case; but firmly believe, that as *the mystery of iniquity** hath been revealed, *the mystery of God†* shall be accomplished likewise, and truth and virtue reign on this earth.

But then let us remember, that full enough hath been done

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* 2 Theff. ii. 7.

† Rev. x. 7.

to verify the first set of predictions; and it is high time we should begin to make good the latter. That Christ hath *sent a sword on earth*, no one doubts: let it now be our care to shew him in a more amiable light, as the *Prince of peace*. We have sufficiently made the *gospel minister to sin*: let us at last bring forth *fruit by it unto holiness*. Then we shall bear in our own breasts the surest, the happiest, the only beneficial proof of its efficacy; and *have our conversation* such amongst unbelievers, that *whereas they now speak against us as evil-doers*, and against our religion itself for our sakes, *they may by our good works, which they shall behold, glorify God**: thus bringing forward that blessed time, when *the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid; when they shall not hurt nor destroy in all his holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea†*.

Yet even this joyful scene will be only a faint shadow of that eternal state of bliss, to which is reserved the complete vindication of the benefits of christianity: and in which, however the present world were to go on, they must appear with irresistible evidence, when the *righteous shall shine forth as the Sun in the kingdom of their Father‡*, when God shall wipe away *all the tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pains§*.

* 2 Pet. ii. 12.

† Matth. xiii. 43.

‡ Isaiah xl. 6, 9.

§ Rev. xxi. 4.

S E R M O N L X I I I .

THE DANGER AND MISERY OF LOOSE MORALS, AND OF LICENTIOUS ASSOCIATES.

E P H. v. 11.

*And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness :
but rather reprove them.*

I F the practice of their duty were general amongst men, it would appear to all of us as we come forward into life, notwithstanding our present proneness to sinful indulgences, extremely natural and easy. For as its reasonableness always recommends it to our understandings, and its amiableness to our affections, when unbiassed : so, in these circumstances, the public example of goodness would engage our imitation, the universal esteem of it excite our ambition, and its beneficial consequences plainly shew it to be our true present interest. Allurements to unlawful pleasures would then be comparatively few ; provocations to mutual injuries none : consciousness of right behaviour would make men pleased with themselves ; reciprocal acts of justice and kindness would make them happy in each other ; and experience, that there being was a blessing to them, would produce in their souls affectionate sentiments of reverential gratitude to the bountiful Author of it. Such we should have found the world, if sin had not entered into it : and such we might still in a good measure bring it to be, if we would ; if most of us did not, besides filling our own lives with guilt and misery, contribute, by a variety of wrong behaviour, to render our fellow-creatures also wicked and wretched. This we all see and feel to be the real state of things : but how do we act upon it ? We complain grievously of each other, for the faults which we each of us go on to commit ;

commit: we complain even of providence, because the world is—only what we have made it; and alledge the misconduct of our neighbours for a defence of our own, instead of trying to mend ourselves or them: whereas, evidently our concern is, to *have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them*; to preserve our own souls from the epidemic distemper, and warn those around us of the danger of being infected. But it is with the security of our personal innocence, that we are to begin: without which we shall seldom in earnest attempt, scarce ever successfully prosecute the reformation of any one else: nor will the greatest success in such endeavours avail us, if, as our apostle expresses it, *when we have preached to others, we ourselves are cast away**.

The first and principal consideration then is, how to avoid any *fellowship with the unfruitful*, a gentle term, which means pernicious, *works of darkness*. Now a main point of caution against all sorts of peril is to know, from whence chiefly we are to apprehend it. But who can say, from what quarter our virtue runs the greatest risque, in a world so thick set round with various temptations: where all vices are so common, that it seems a matter of course, and almost of necessity, to indulge one or another; and the majority of the guilty is so large, that each considers himself, in some degree, as safe in the crowd even from divine displeasure, *numbering himself amongst the multitude of sinners*, and not *remembering that wrath will not tarry long*†: where our eyes and our ears continually present to our imaginations crimes, of which else we should never have thought, and suggest easy methods of attaining what we believed to be as impracticable, as we know it to be unlawful: where the prosperity of ill men so strongly prompts us to envy their condition, imitate their presumptuousness, and doubt of a superintending power: where every natural inclination that we have meets with something to inflame it beyond bounds, or turn it aside from its proper object: where fear of inconveniencies threatening upright conduct, and hope of gaining advantages by deviations from it, work within us continually: where injuries, real or fancied, are daily provoking us to injure or hate in return; and even friendship and kind affection, meeting too often with undeserving objects, make us partial
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* 1 Cor. ix. 27.

† Eccles. vii. 16.

and unfair, subservient to the purposes of the bad or injudicious, and criminally negligent of the merits of the worthy?

Here is already an alarming list of dangers: and yet one source of them remains unmentioned, so very fruitful, that probably it brings more of us to ruin than all the rest: I mean, our strong tendency to follow whatever precedents are set us: which being the great seducer of mankind to *have fellowship with one another in the unfruitful works of darkness*, I shall confine myself to the consideration of it in the sequel of this discourse.

A disposition to fall in with what we see others do is one of the earliest natural principles that we exert: and in itself a very beneficial one. For by means of it we learn, with ease and pleasure, a multitude of things necessary or serviceable in life: conform readily to the inclinations of those about us in a thousand matters of indifference, and from mutual likeness become mutually agreeable. By the same means also, were patterns of piety and virtue more frequent, or we more attentive to them, we might be excited, as undoubtedly it was designed we should, to copy, and even rival, each other's laudable qualities. But where things are capable of contrary uses, we generally make the worst of them: and in no case more than this. The example of evil, in a corrupted world, is by much the oftenest in our view: which the weak and indolent imitate without reflexion; the good-humoured and pliable are drawn after them by the desire of pleasing, though in wrong ways; the vain and ambitious by fondness of excelling, though in culpable attainments; and almost all by the shame of singularity and dread of ridicule: till the numbers of the faulty being thus become abundantly sufficient to keep one another in countenance, custom refuses to let its authority be any longer examined, and sets up itself as the sole rule of conduct.

For, even when we seem to act the most entirely from opinions and dispositions of our own, these, upon inquiry, will be frequently found to derive, if not their original, at least a great part of their strength, from the deference that we pay to the notions and practice of the world. Thus men speak and think slightly of religion, often without imagining they know any objection of weight against it: and yet how they can have

the very lowest degree of belief in it, and not believe it to be an affair of the utmost importance, is quite inconceivable: but notwithstanding they treat it, without scruple, as a slight matter, because they see it commonly treated so. But this degree of depravity is not universal. We, perhaps, may blame those who do so, and with marks of great seriousness profess ourselves christians: yet, it may be, are easy in transgressing, in a higher degree or a lower, as occasion offers, almost every precept of christianity, because others, who call themselves christians also, do the same thing. We acknowledge that we are soon to leave this earth, and give an account to God of the part which we have acted upon it: yet perceiving, that most people about us overlook these awful truths, we can do so too, as absolutely, as if we had no concern in them. And, to be a little more particular: what is it that makes us in our common discourse so regardless of equity and humanity, so eager to speak evil and propagate scandal? Surely not always malignity of heart: and certainly very seldom any peculiar knowledge of the case, or interest in it. But such is the reigning turn of conversation, which we are wicked and weak enough to adopt and promote, at the very time that we inveigh bitterly against it, and suffer grievously by it. Again: how many are there who trifle away their days, in thinking of and doing nothing that tends to any good purpose, only because trifling is fashionable! How many are there who affect follies and vices, to which, at the bottom, they have little or no liking, which are highly prejudicial, and will probably be fatal to them, merely because they are in vogue: and for no wiser a reason will persevere in them, when nature cries aloud to have them left off! How many distress and undo themselves and their families, by imprudently vying with the luxury and expensiveness of those about them, nay, of those above them! And, in general, from what is it else, than taking it on trust from common persuasion, that possessing the things of this world is happiness; though we not only may observe the contrary in all whom we know, but feel it in ourselves; that we pursue them through sins and through sufferings of all kinds, and detest one another on account of them, at the rate we do? What, indeed, else could support the absurdity of seeking our chief good where plainly it is not, but that we all see one another do so,
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and will persuade ourselves, against the fullest evidence, that so universal an attachment must be well grounded.

But the example of a small part of mankind is often sufficient to lead us into strange errors. Where party-zeal of any kind prevails, into what monstrous opinions of men and things, what utter disregard to all truth and justice, to public spirit and humanity, will men run one after another ! Indeed they will do things, when united in bodies, which, taken singly, they would abhor: nay, will think they justify their own behaviour, completely, by alledging only, that it is the same with that of their opposers, whom they condemn as the worst of men. Sometimes a less authority than this proves able to misguide us: and a blind prepossession in favour of a few persons, or a single one, shall seduce us into a very unjustifiable imitation; and even make us, by the means of it, contemptible, or, by carrying it too far, guilty, when what we meant to copy was commendable, or however innocent.

Without specifying more instances, or enlarging on these, the mischiefs of being injudiciously *conformed to this world** appear so considerable, as to make the remedies which can be found for it extremely desirable. Now, remedies of mischiefs vary with their causes: which in this case are numerous.

1. Some follow the multitude to do evil† from mere inconsiderateness: poor creatures, greatly to be pitied, and yet severely reprov'd. For, surely, enough depends on our choosing right in life, to make us think about it: and there is appearance enough of errors in the common practice, to give us no little diffidence in a matter of such moment. But mankind in general being thoughtless, each individual, as he goes on with the rest, finding few or none different from himself to compare with, is hardly sensible of his own being so. Yet would we in imagination, step out of the present scene of things for a while, consider ourselves as mere spectators, and view the course of them as they pass before us, how amazing would the sight be ! The plain and only way to happiness, through the faithful cultivation of piety and virtue, almost unanimously neglected: nations and ages treading, in mutual implicit reliance, paths leading to destruction: the less faulty surprisingly apt

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* Rom. xi i. 2.

† Exod. xxiii. 2.

to be dissipated in a hurry of amusements, or plod on in worldly business without higher attentions; the rest, by irregular passions, and unlawful pursuits, making themselves and their neighbours as wretched at present as they well can, and at the same time providing for unspeakably greater misery hereafter: every generation reminded, every single person seeing, on one occasion or another, in how wrong a course they are; yet shutting their eyes again, and going forward blindfold: none almost taking warning by the fate of his predecessors; but each leaving, in his turn, an useless admonition of his own to such as come in his stead. *This their way is their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings**. And shall we be of the number of those who act thus: or rather assert our right to judge for ourselves, where it concerns us so nearly? Such is the usage of the world: but is it the dictate of conscience, is it the road to happiness? The multitude, *blind leaders of the blind†*, have they reason, have they scripture, have they the final event of things, to justify them? If not, let us chuse a safer guidance; and apply the real rule of life to direct our steps: ask ourselves often, what we are doing, and what it tends to? Stop short, wherever we discern ground for suspicion; beware of plausible pleas, for they often colour over the worst actions; beware of indiscreet compliances, for they border nearly upon criminal ones; and ever remember the son of *Sirach's* advice: *go not in a way wherein thou mayest fall. Be not confident in a plain way‡*. But above all let us beware of ourselves: and recollecting, as we have but too much cause, our natural supineness, and forgetfulness of the cautions that we so often receive, *give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip§*; and *set our hearts unto the words of God's law, for it is not a vain thing for us, because it is our life||*.

2. Others there are, not absolutely thoughtless about their conduct, but distrustful of their own judgment: borne down by so great an authority, as the practice of all mankind appears to be, against seriousness in religion and strictness in virtue. But, universal as this practice may seem, there are many

* Psal. xlix. 13.

† Matth. xv. 14.

‡ Eccles. xxxii. 21, 22.

§ Heb. ii. 1.

|| Deut. xxxii. 46, 47.

many exceptions from it amongst all ranks, and some, God be praised, in the highest, of exemplary christians, who, *in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, shine as lights in the world**. But were the apostacy more general than it is, yet being the effect of mere inconsiderateness or ungoverned passions, what weight can there be in the most perfect agreement of persons thus influenced? Or if still the multitude together look formidable, separate them; and consider singly, of whom the whole is composed. The much larger part will be acknowledged at first sight to be such, as we should be ashamed once to think of taking for our directors, in a point of any consequence. And for the rest: the rich and great are rather peculiarly exposed to temptation, and, of course, to fall, than qualified to discover and relish those momentous truths and rules of life, which humility and retirement into ourselves best dispose us to receive. The learned and knowing are liable to be misled into wrong judgements by the vanity of judging differently from common men; nor do they always act agreeably to what they inwardly think. And the reputed wise and able very frequently have never considered in earnest what the true wisdom of life is, but only busied themselves with a silly cunning to attain what they have rashly and falsely taken for the end, at which they were to aim.

But further: this universal consent, pleaded against observing the precepts of religion, is, when examined, no consent at all. For as the vices of men are contrary to each other, and every vicious temper is full of inconsistencies within itself: no one immoral course will ever be generally approved, nor almost any one immoral person continue long of the same opinion. The only thing, in which we shall find them agree, is that, which they all by turns own, that the conduct of the virtuous is right; and their own, wrong. Here, therefore, a pious and discreet man will easily raise an intestine war amongst the enemy: defend himself against one side by the authority of the other; indeed against all sides by the authority of all: and in conclusion resolve, slighting and pitying a divided giddy crowd, *in every good work to trust his own soul; for this is the keeping of the commandments†*.

3. Another strong inducement to have fellowship with the
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* Phil. ii. 15.

† Ecc'us. xxxii. 23.

bad customs of the world, is desire of being esteemed by it. But do the vicious really esteem one another? Do they not almost always hate or despise one another? Or suppose that, for joining in their sins and absurdities, you were sure to receive their applause as your reward. Perhaps the whole meaning of it is at the bottom no more than this: they want to keep themselves in countenance, being conscious that they have occasion for it, by adding as many as they can to their number; and their good opinion of you is thinking you weak enough to be drawn in for one. Or perhaps the superiority, which your innocence gives you over them, is painful to them; and they would fain bring you down to their own level. Or they have some interested design upon you, or they consider you as an instrument fitted to amuse and entertain them: and so extol you, while they deride you. This, you see, is not being admired: it is being made a tool. But were it otherwise: consider a little; what can such admiration be worth? How long will it be likely to last? And what must the consequences prove, now and to eternity? Why then, instead of courting outward regard from those, who inwardly condemn themselves, do you not chuse to be respected by the wise and good, to enjoy the testimony of your own conscience, and to secure the important approbation of him, who hath said, *them that honour me, I will honour: and they that despise me, shall be lightly esteemed**?

4. A further motive, which yet more powerfully inclines too many to unlawful compliances, is false good-nature and shame. They have so excessive a flexibility of temper, that they know not how to stand out against what the practice of the world recommends, and especially what their acquaintance invite and press them to, though they ever so clearly see the impropriety of it, and have ever so firmly resolved the contrary. Unhappy creatures, betrayed by dispositions, almost virtuous, into vice! The truly good-natured part, would they but reflect, is to lead others in the right way, not to follow them in the wrong: the truly shameful behaviour, not to be resolute, obstinate, if tempters please to call it so, in consulting our present and future welfare. *Beware of evil, saith the son of Sirach, and be not ashamed, when it concerneth thy soul. For there is a shame,*

* Sam. ii. 30.

shame that bringeth sin: and there is a shame which is glory and grace. Accept no person against thy soul; and let not the reverence of any man cause thee to fall. There is, that destroyeth his own soul through bashfulness, and by accepting of persons, overthroweth himself†. But they, who have the misfortune to be of this make, should by no means trust to their own most solemn purposes, or even vows. Their chief safety is in flight; in avoiding, to their utmost, such company and such things, though ever so agreeable, as may endanger their innocence; and keeping at a distance from temptation, till they can bear it better. Thus they will escape at once the uneasiness of resisting and the hazard of yielding, and increase their strength gradually by a cautious exercise of it: provided they rest not in human means only, but, with faith and humility unfeigned, apply for and depend on the divine assistance, promised through Jesus Christ; the necessity of which for every person, in every case, we presume you always understand, and for that sole reason we do not always express it.*

5. With this inward weakness is commonly joined an apprehension of difficulties from without: of public dislike and censure for condemning the public taste by a different conduct; or at least of much ridicule, a thing full as hard to be borne, for doing conscientiously what the world despises, and abstaining from what it doth without scruple. But let not the danger of censure appear to any one so frightful. Indeed if persons take absurd or indifferent observances to the great duties; if they are strict in their performance of one duty, and grossly negligent of others; or if to the performance of many there be added, either a vain desire of making their own goodness remarkable, or the provoking sin of uncharitableness towards others, they must not expect very favourable treatment. But an uniformly good christian, without superstition, without affectation, and without founness, which are surely none of them virtues, may *live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world†*, bad as it is, ever so long, without any great danger, either of making himself enemies by doing no harm, and as much good as he can, or of falling into contempt, for acting only as every man in his heart

* Ecclus. iv. 20, 21, 22.

† Ecclus. xx. 22.

‡ Tit. ii. 12.

knows he himself ought to act. But if ever this prove otherwise, instead of being *shaken in our minds** by it, let us consider, how much more censure we should incur and deserve by a vicious life, to say nothing of other inconveniences: and above all, let us consider that infinitely more important censure, which both we, and our scorers, are shortly to undergo: and since, as St. Peter argues, they who *think it strange, that we run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of us shall give account to him, that is ready to judge the quick and the dead*; let us arm ourselves with this mind, that we live not our time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God†.

As for the ridicule, which ludicrous scoffers love to throw upon religion: we may avoid much of it by prudence, and despise the rest with ease. It falls heaviest on the pretences to piety made by the vicious; and we shall seldom be thought such, if we are not: or on the reservedness and formality of some, who are good. Now indeed it is never advisable to go the utmost lengths of what may, strictly speaking, be just lawful; they adjoin so very closely on what is forbidden: yet there is a contrary extreme, an immoderate suspiciousness of innocent compliances. And they, who indulge it, lay a heavier burthen on themselves than they need, perhaps than they will support without sinking under it. But at least they rob their own minds of that serenity and cheerfulness, which they might and ought to have enjoyed: they disguise religion under a gloomy uninviting appearance, which is great pity; and furnish the profane with a grievous handle for exposing both them and it; till perhaps they at length grow ashamed of their profession, and make a sudden exchange of their excessive rigour for the worse errors of libertinism and infidelity. Therefore, in a moderate degree, on proper occasions, let us not be backward to bear a part in such customs of the world, as we are sure we safely may: and let it, if possible, be a graceful one. On the other hand, whatever, though harmless in itself, may be a snare to us, or by our means to others, let us abstain from it indeed resolutely, but abstain with an easy air and manner: keep our reasons to ourselves, rather than be eager

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* 2 Thess. ii. 2.

† 1 Pet. iv. 1, 2, 4, 5.

to mention them : or mention them, if it may do good, without exaggerating or insisting too vehemently upon any thing ; but so as may best convince men of the solidity of our judgement, and reasonableness of our conduct. Behaving thus, we may well hope to become objects, at least after a while, of respect instead of derision, to which no part of genuine piety is on any account liable. And they, who set themselves to make a jest of it, might without difficulty, if the seriousness of their case, and sometimes pity, sometimes just indignation, did not prevent it, have that weapon turned upon them, and be proved the most absurd of all human beings. Their scrupulousness of admitting the most indubitable truths of religion ; and readiness at the same time to acquiesce in the wildest imaginations, that are unfavourable to it : their schemes of making themselves easy by counteracting the dictates of their own conscience ; and happy by transgressing the laws of infinite wisdom and goodness, enforced by almighty power : their delight in the hopes of existing no longer than the space of this transitory life, and their haste to ruin health, fortune and reputation, all that can afford them enjoyment, in the very beginning of life : their earnest pursuits of what they frequently despise at the time, and almost always nauseate soon after they have attained it ; and the tormenting inward conflicts, that they often experience, between two passions, both of them perhaps foolish, and both pernicious, which shall be preferred : surely these things, and above all their triumphing in the wisdom of these things, and insulting those who are stupid enough to follow the rules of plain reason, and the directions of God himself from heaven, as the best guides to their present and future well-being, might, without any great effort, be so described, as to retort on their own heads a double share of the contempt, which they are so liberal in throwing about them. But however unwilling or unfit a wise man may be to *answer fools according to their folly**, at least he will see it to be unworthy of his notice ; and go on, unconcerned, through the impotent attacks of it, in the steady practice of *whatsoever things are true and honest, whatsoever things are lovely and of good report†*; recollecting daily that awful and repeated declaration of the holy Jesus, *who-soever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulter-*

* PROV. xxvi. 4, 5.

† Phil. iv. 8.

ous and sinful generation, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*. Then shall the righteous man, as the book of Wisdom beautifully expresses it, stand in great boldness before the face of such as made no account of his labours. And they repenting, and groaning for anguish of spirit, shall say within themselves, this was he, whom we had sometime in derision, and a proverb of reproach. We fools accounted his life madness, and his end to be without honour. How is he numbered among the children of God, and his lot is amongst the saints! Therefore have we erred from the way of truth, and wearied ourselves in the way of wickedness and destruction. What hath our pride profited us; and what good hath our vaunting brought us? All those things are passed away like a shadow; and as the dust that is blown away with the wind. But the righteous live for evermore: their reward also is with the Lord, and the care of them is with the Most High†.

* Mark. viii. 38.

† Wisd. v.

S E R M O N L X I V .

THE DANGER AND MISERY OF LOOSE MORALS, AND OF LICENTIOUS ASSOCIATES.

E P H. V. II.

*And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness :
but rather reprove them.*

THE prevalence of impiety and immorality in the world, hath not only made the original duties of mankind more difficult, by increasing the temptations to transgress them, but added to their number many new obligations of great importance, relating partly to the concern of preserving ourselves, partly to the charity of guarding others, from the general infection. Our own preservation is doubtless to be the first object of our attention, as we are primarily intrusted with, and answerable for, our own persons, and have by nature the strongest solicitude for our own happiness. But zeal for that of our fellow-creatures ought certainly to fill the second place in our breasts ; and is a duty much too little regarded, even by the good ; considering how indispensably both religion and humanity, and indeed our common interest, require us to promote what is right and fit, and restrain each other from sin and ruin, by all such methods as we properly can. For every one is by no means qualified to use every method : and therefore, without prudent reflection, many may both labour and suffer much, without any prospect of its turning to account : nay, may involve themselves in guilt by immoderate eagerness to reform their neighbours. But, though all must consult their own strength and opportunities, and leave to those who are better able, and to the providence of God, what they find themselves unequal to : there still remains to every one of us a pro-

per share of this great work ; and we ought to be faithfully diligent, within the sphere of our influence, be it larger or smaller, to discountenance wickedness, and encourage piety and virtue, by all those ways, to which God, having adapted our powers and circumstances, hath consequently called us. And as these vary greatly, so the apostle hath given room in the text for treating of them all, by mentioning the lowest instance of due care in this respect, *having no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness* ; and the highest, *reproving them*.

I. The first of these, barely not partaking in the bad actions that others commit, may seem perhaps to be scarce doing any thing for the opposite cause. And yet, as the common practice of sin is the principal plea in its favour, it is of great consequence to shew, that the practice is not universal : that there are still persons left, who fear God and love his laws, who abhor an unworthy deed, and despise a criminal pleasure. The profligate, sensible that a virtuous character is the superior one in speculation, have nothing left, but to question the reality of it in fact : and by reflecting very little, and conversing with such only, or chiefly, as are like themselves, they become by degrees almost persuaded, that all men are wicked, and cannot be otherwise. This opinion extinguishes modesty, as well as deadens conscience : they triumph in their imaginary discovery, degrading as it is to human nature, and insult the vanity of those who presume to think themselves moral agents. It is lamentable to observe, how far they have succeeded in their monstrous attempt to pervert the true order of things. While they *glory in their shame* *, too many grow ashamed of what they ought to account their glory : would wish to have their performance of religious duties, and the regularity of their lives, unknown or disbelieved, or ascribed to some other motive than principle : or, it may be, a few fashionable sins imputed to them, to save their reputations. By the influence of such preposterous baseness, they often become at length what they desire to seem : at least they suffer others to fall, whom the authority of their example might have supported, and confirm the profane and vicious in their wrong notions and courses. Another inducement, besides cowardice,

* Phil. iii. 19.

cowardice, to this improper conduct, is an abhorrence of being thought ostentatious: which hath the more weight, because in all matters, and especially in religion, whoever takes uncommon pains to make a shew, will be suspected of not having much reality. But if affectation on that hand be a fault, affectation on the other is a greater; and the plain rule of behaviour lies between them: that every christian go through his christian duty with uprightness and simplicity; neither desiring to bring the private parts of it into public view, nor labouring to make a secret of his faith and practice in cases, where they would of course be seen. A natural artless procedure will as certainly vindicate itself, as dishonest contrivances will be detected. And therefore let no fear to be thought, or, when occasion requires, to let all mankind perceive that he is rightly thought, religious and conscientious. The regulation of our appetites and passions, by reason and good sense, can never be a ground of contempt. *Doing justice and loving mercy*, is honoured throughout the earth. And though it should be added of the same person, who lives by these rules, that he also *walks humbly with his God* *: one doth not discern, why that should lessen the good opinion pre-conceived of him; or how those who every day with abject servility are worshipping others, no better than themselves, for trifling interests, can pretend to think it meanness in him, that he honours and adores the maker and judge of all. Nay, let it be said further, that he adores him suitably to the directions laid down in scripture: and conscious of his own ignorance, guilt, and weakness, is willing thankfully to accept instruction, pardon, assistance, and eternal life, the free gifts of his heavenly Father, on the giver's terms, through faith in the merits of *Jesus Christ*, and the grace of the Holy Spirit; still who hath a right to blame him, unless he can prove, which no one ever hath done or will, that this is not the way to happiness here and hereafter, and that any other is? A virtuous, a religious, a christian character then, as it always deserves, will generally command respect: its amiableness, its importance to public, to private welfare, will be visible. And, in proportion as numbers appear possessed of it, the vicious will be awed into silence, and the modester part of them at least into outward imitation,

* Mic. vi. 8.

imitation, which may produce in time, through God's grace, inward seriousness. But, however these may be affected, all the well-inclined will rejoice in the protection, and improve by the example, of such declared friends. Almost every one may do some good in this way, and possibly far more than he imagines, merely by maintaining openly an uniform tenour of pious and moral behaviour, without taking any pains to call the attention of mankind to it. But the rich, the noble, the powerful, the learned, the ingenious, the admired, those especially in whom several of these advantages are united, may, barely by manifesting themselves to be such as they ought, each of them singly reform or preserve multitudes of their inferiors; and a number of them combined oppose and put to flight the reigning vices of the whole age in which they live.

Hence it is, that our Saviour hath laid so great a stress on the duty of *confessing him before men**; and exhorted his disciples thus, *ye are the light of the world; let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven*†. Hence also St. Paul, alluding probably to the expressions of his master, though not present when they were used, saith of those who are *blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, that they shine in the midst of others as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life*‡.

II. After exhibiting a pattern of goodness in ourselves, our next care should be to promote in a proper manner, on all fit occasions, the esteem of whatever is good in others. The generality attend not enough to moral excellencies, and too often consider them in a wrong point of view: by which means they overlook, or sometimes conceive prejudices against, what they would else honour, and be proud to imitate. Therefore, whenever favourable opportunities present themselves, they should be instantly seized: and the rightness, the loveliness, the beneficial fruits of each virtue shewn to such as are not yet sufficiently sensible of them: the ridicule, which hath been unjustly thrown on some duties, taken off; and the misrepresentations, which have rendered them contemptible, rectified: the plea of excessive severity, urged against others, confuted; and the

* Matth. x. 32.

† Matth. v. 14, 16.

‡ Phil. ii. 15, 16.

the real difficulty of practising them proved to be eligible, by the shortness of its continuance, and the blessed effects of overcoming it. At the same time we should exemplify these truths, whenever we can, in the characters of the worthy: on whom we should be always endeavouring to turn the eyes of our acquaintance; to place them and their actions in an advantageous light; to vindicate them from aspersions; to convince as many as possible, how much more valuable, and conducive both to private and public welfare, a religious and honest principle is, than the most shining and envied accomplishments, when separated from it. Accordingly it should be our study to cherish and recommend such as are eminent for this merit; to support and prefer their interests; to make them known and acceptable one to another; and forward amongst them a general union, that above all things would gain them respect and success. But,

III. Whilst we are thus labouring to encourage virtue and religion, we must be extremely cautious that we obstruct not our own work, by favouring any sort of wickedness: that we never patronize, for the sake of our own gratification, what may probably tempt unguarded innocence into sin, or furnish the ill-inclined with the means of committing it: that we contribute not to raise any bad or even suspicious person to a condition of doing harm: that we protect not the guilty with our interest or power, nor varnish over their faults from considerations of private interest or friendship: but fairly suffer truth to prevail, and crimes to be detected, as they ought. For whatever particular good purposes may seem, and perhaps but seem, to be served at present by the contrary policy, they will never counterbalance the general mischiefs arising from it. Further, we must not pay court to, or delight in the vicious, for the sake of some wit and pleasantry, some superficial agreeableness, that sets off their vices: we must never even seem to look on either villany or debauchery, as objects of mirth only; extol the entertaining qualities of him, that ruins others by them: or the abilities of the man, that uses them to his neighbours wrong. Else we shall teach those around us to esteem and emulate them: indeed we shall accustom ourselves to regard such characters as accomplished and respectable, not as detestable; and come, at length, instead of pitying, to despise and ridicule those who suffer by them: thus wickedly augmenting the triumph of the one, and
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the affliction of the other. *David* mentions it amongst the distinguishing marks of him, who *shall abide in the tabernacle of the Lord, and dwell in his holy hill, that in his eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them, that fear the Lord**. And *St. Paul* seems to make it in some sense a less crime for a man to live immorally himself, than to rejoice in others that live so: *who, knowing the judgment of God, saith he, that they, which commit such things, are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them*†. We have from nature strong appetites and passions in our corrupted frame, which tempt us so vehemently, and hurry us often so suddenly into some sins, that perhaps we may not be altogether void of excuse. But there is no original principle within us, that leads us coolly and deliberately to approve them in others. This therefore can only proceed from a peculiar and wilful depravation of heart, equivalent to what might be produced by many repeated acts of transgression.

And here it must be observed, that voluntary intimacy with the wicked is one degree of shewing countenance to them, and ought to be avoided sometimes, indeed, nearness of relation, connexions in business, the necessities of affairs; at others, common civility and decency of behaviour, which, though a weaker tie, it may be very unadvisable to break through, oblige us to keep up acquaintances of this sort. And indeed what *St. Paul* observes of the heathens of his days, that if a man would not *company with the grossly wicked amongst them, he must needs go out of the world*‡, is become too true even of the professed christians of ours. Besides, a reasonable prospect of reforming the faulty may justify one, especially of known and confirmed virtue, in conversing much with them, and being, what our Saviour was very truly though maliciously, called *a friend of publicans and sinners*§. But to affect, or even permit, beyond what such reasons require, either friendships or familiarities with habitual transgressors of the laws of God, is on many accounts unallowable. On our own account we should resolve against it, for the sake of our good name: which, in a world so censorious, it is difficult enough to preserve, by the discreetest behaviour, unfulled; and therefore

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* *Psalm* xv. 1, 4.§ *Matth.* xi. 19.† *Rom.* i. 32.‡ *1 Cor.* v. 9, 10.

we must not hope to escape, if by ill-chosen company we give real ground for a bad opinion of us in some degree : and too fair a pretence for carrying it farther than probably we deserve. And yet how soon we may come, by such imprudences, to deserve a much worse opinion than we apprehend, cannot be foreseen : considering, how prone both to imitation and to wickedness the human heart is, and how much this propensity must be encreased, when we place crimes before it in so alluring a light, as that of their being practised without any scruple by our daily agreeable associates. But were we ever so secure in all respects, there is a dignity belonging to piety and virtue, which ought to be supported ; and is betrayed, when we mix unnecessarily with the profligate and abandoned : whom besides we thus make easy and harden in their unlawful courses ; nay, give them also the public credit of being regarded by us, and well with us ; which may enable them to do we know not what harm. Besides, by such undistinguishing treatment of men, we disqualify ourselves from shewing that preference to the worthy, which is their due ; and lead others, more or less, to slight the difference of characters, and, in probable consequence, the notions of right and wrong. *That be far from thee, to do after this manner ; as Abraham speaks on another occasion : and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee **.

To such degree then, as every one can, he ought to avoid the very appearance of these improper attachments : or, if he hath failed in point of precaution, must immediately think of the means of disengaging himself. Sometimes a steady adherence to our duty is enough to effect it : and such persons grow weary of an acquaintance, whose conduct reproves them, and whose ears are deaf to their solicitations. But if that proves otherwise ; and either the scandalousness of their lives, or imminent danger of being at length perverted by them, requires a more speedy and abrupt step to be taken, we shall do well, on some flagrant occasion, to renounce all commerce with them at once : which, at the same time that it sets us free, may possibly make on them, by the strength of the shock, a salutary impression. Where the familiarity either cannot or ought not to be broken off, the degree of it, however, may be so moderated, or such exceptions to it contrived in particular instances,

VOL. II.

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that,

* Gen. xviii. 25.

that, paying strictly all due regard to them, we may be known to disapprove what they do amiss : stand at a visible distance from the faults of those to whom we are nearest : and be, like our blessed Lord, *holy, harmless, and undefiled, separate from sinners* *, though we preserve, when called to it, a course of easy demeanour in the midst of them. In proportion as our situation will permit us to vary our deportment from time to time, we may with-hold from them, when any enormities of theirs demand it the usual frankness and cheerfulness of our conversation, and restore it on the prospect of their amendment : we may also, and should, be watchful to express our delight in every right action they perform ; to signify inoffensively the affliction we suffer when they misbehave ; and thus move their good nature, if any be left in them, to give us pleasure, not pain, while we so evidently wish them well. But still sometimes neither these nor the preceding methods can be tried, at others they are sure or likely to prove ineffectual : and therefore,

IV. We must have recourse to that, which the apostle specifies in the last words of the text, *reproving them*. Various persons, indeed, on various accounts, we cannot *reprove for their works of darkness* : either having no access to them, or no title to use that freedom. Or at most, we can only convey oblique reproof under some agreeable, or however inoffensive, disguise ; or make a small advance upon the borders of plain speech, observing well on which side they are most accessible ; and watching for the seasons, when good dispositions either prevail or may be excited. Nor should we neglect any one of these honest artifices ; for the skilful application of them may possibly enable us to gain ground, by unperceived degrees, on their inordinate passions and bad habits ; and thus carry them such lengths towards reformation, as we should in vain have attempted, had they at first perceived the whole of our design.

But, in many cases, more direct and home remonstrances to the faulty are necessary : which, therefore, such, as with propriety can, are bound to make ; and whatever reluctance they may find to so painful a work, must, as the scripture directs, *in any wise rebuke their neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him* :
for

for omitting it is in the same place interpreted to be *batting him in their heart**. Timely admonition may stop him short just at the entrance upon a wrong course, and snatch him out of imminent hazard unhurt. Even those, who are farther gone, may yet be recalled, by a lively representation of their guilt and danger, of which, perhaps, they had a very inadequate, if any, apprehension. But then we must be very careful, unless we would intirely lose all influence, both at present and for the future, that we never bring a charge without having incontestable proof of its truth; that a genuine friendly concern be evidently the principle of all we say; that we express more sorrow than anger, where circumstances will allow it; as they peculiarly do, where the person blamed hurts himself more than any one else: that we use tender expostulations by choice; and harsh expressions, but above all, terrifying and threatening ones, only when nothing else will prevent ruin. For this is, doubtless, the meaning of the apostle's rule: *of some have compassion, making a difference; others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire*†. And even where the strongest marks of disapprobation and displeasure are needful, they should ever be shewn without insult or haughtiness, without the least appearance of loving to reprimand, without exaggerating any thing, or treating the frailties of human nature too severely: indeed with such attention to acknowledge and point out whatever in the general character of the person concerned is valuable, or in the particular circumstances of the case excusable, as may reconcile him, if possible, to the liberties taken with him, by the conviction that they are taken unwillingly.

Many other precautions, for the better success of this good work, every one's prudence will suggest to him, in the several instances that come before him, according to the nature of the offence, the temper of the offender, and especially the degree of authority which the reprover hath over him. Sometimes all authority is best laid aside, and softened into mere persuasion: sometimes a moderate share of its weight is wanted, to bear down a less complying disposition: at others, its whole force is little enough to fetter a stubborn spirit. Here then we must each of us think and act for ourselves: but with

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this

* Lev. xix. 17.

† Jude 22, 23.

this consideration ever present to our minds, that not only a total neglect of this duty, but a neglect of discharging it in the most effectual manner that is incumbent on us, will be imputed to us for guilt; as it was in the case of *Eli*: who having contented himself with gently blaming his sons, for what he ought absolutely to have forbidden them, and deterred them from, *I will judge his house for ever*, said God, *for the iniquity which he knoweth, because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not**.

When, therefore, mild representations have small effect, rougher treatment must be used. And if the offender grows hardened to private remonstrances, it becomes needful to apply the severer discipline of more open censure. Possibly he may yet retain sensibility enough to be moved by that: for which reason our Saviour appoints, that we observe a gradation: first, *tell our brother his faults between us and him alone*; then, *take with us one or two more*; and, lastly, *tell it unto the church*†; let the whole number of good persons, with whom we are both of us connected, try their interest with him. And if even that fail, and no hope at all remain of him; yet by-standers at least will thus both be put on their guard against suffering by him, and warned against imitating him. Therefore *St. Paul* directs; *them than sin*, doubtless meaning obstinately, *rebuke before all, that others also may fear*‡. Indeed were every one to be exposed for each misbehaviour of which he is guilty, or even all such as he doth not immediately reform; this procedure would be unchristian and inhuman: many good persons would pass in common esteem for very bad; and many blameable ones, but of whose recovery there is room for great hope, would be driven to despair of regaining any character, and lay aside the thought of growing better. But there is no need of being so tender about the reputations of those, who are totally abandoned to sin. On the contrary, it is of importance to the world, that they should be known for what they are: and not enabled to pass themselves upon mankind for worthy characters, by receiving the same regards with such in common speech and behaviour. *He that saith unto the wicked, thou art righteous, him shall the people curse, nations shall abhor him. But, to them that rebuke him, shall be delight, and a good blessing shall come*

* 1 Sam. iii. 13.

† Matth. xviii. 15, 16, 17.

‡ 1 Tim. v. 20.

*come upon them**. There is frequently no other weapon left against such persons, but public infamy. The punishments of human laws in multitudes of cases cannot reach them. Those of a future life some have brought themselves to doubt: many to overlook. But to the dislike and abhorrence of mankind few or none can be insensible: and every one that deserves it should be made to feel that he doth. Wickedness is the great disturber of the world: the bane of all peace and comfort, civil and domestic. Therefore every one hath a natural right to stand up and declare against it: a claim, that the disgrace, which belongs to it, be inflicted on it. And in this cause good men should act with spirit; assume the authority, in which their character will support them; and not suffer guilt, which is by nature timorous and cowardly, to lift up its head: they should unite in the common concern of opposing its progress; and, as the prophet expresses it, *be valiant for the truth upon the earth*†. A zeal, shewn uniformly by the virtuous against vice and that alone; keep free from all mixture of personal resentment or private interest; appearing, by the steps which it takes, not to proceed from moroseness of temper, but from principle, and conducted by a moderate share of prudence, will easily rescue itself from wrong interpretations, secure to itself reverence from the world in general; and produce much good, without proportionable hazard or difficulty.

It must, however, be confessed, that neither is every one qualified equally for such a work; some, by nature, being little capable of exerting themselves, or moving others, and some again of so warm passions, that they must not allow them scope, even in the best cause: nor will the situation and connexions of every one always by any means permit him to appear against ill actions and ill people in the manner that he could wish. Yet no one is left without the means of doing somewhat towards it: and all that we are able to do, without neglecting other obligations, is our duty. Whoever can look with just the same eye on good and bad, provided his own present advantage be out of the question, hath no love of religion, or virtue in him. And whoever takes no notice of the difference will be shrewdly suspected of not seeing or not regarding it. The coolest spectator of other wrong things that are
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* Prov. xxiv. 24, 25.

† Jer. ix. 3.

done thinks immediately, when any happen to effect himself, that all ought to interest themselves on his behalf, indeed can hardly do it too much. And therefore, when things are done, which affect the happiness of others, the welfare of society, the honour of our Maker, our Redeemer, and our Sanctifier, we ought to interest ourselves for these. Perhaps we may object, that our concern would be fruitless. And so, perhaps, was that of *David*, when he said, *rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because men keep not thy law. My zeal hath even consumed me, because they forget thy words**. But certainly so was that of *just Lot*, who dwelling among the inhabitants of *Sodom*, in seeing and hearing vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds†. Yet they are proposed as objects, not of blame, but praise. And indeed uneasy sentiments on such occasions, however ineffectual otherwise, may improve us considerably, by reminding us, *that we are of God, and the world lieth in wickedness‡*; provided we carefully restrain them, which itself will be a profitable inward exercise, from running into excess. Besides, whoever preserves this due medium between indifference and vehemence, as he will be always prudently seeking methods of reclaiming, or at least of checking the guilty, and consequently securing the innocent; so he will find more than any one else can suggest to him: and though hated by the bad, or despised by the thoughtless, for this troublesome activity, will be esteemed by many fellow-labourers, many converts whom he hath helped to make, many ready to fall, whom he hath seasonably stayed and strengthened. Or let him have ever so much cause to say in other respects, *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought: yet surely his judgement is with the Lord, and his work with his God§*.

* Psal. cxix. 136, 139.

† 1 John v. 19.

‡ 2 Pet. ii. 8.

§ Isa. xlix. 4.

S E R M O N L X V .

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-EXAMINATION, AND CONSEQUENT REFORMATION.

L A M . iii. 40.

Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.

THE gracious and wise Creator of all things, as he hath made known to every creature, by a secret instinct, the way of life which belongs to its frame and condition: so to man *he hath shewn*, both by his affections and his understanding, *what is good, and what he requires of him*. Yet having placed him in a state of trial, in which these inward principles might be perverted and mislead him, he hath graciously super-added external manifestations of his will for our surer and completer guidance: thus making our rule of duty evident and obligatory in the highest degree. No course of action is more plainly suited to the nature of any agent, than religion and virtue is to ours. For what can be more evidently natural, than for a reasonable being to make reason his governing principle; for a social being *to do justly, and love mercy*; and for a created one *to walk humbly with his God* *? Agreeably therefore to this peculiar destination, which allots to us employments worthy to fill up an eternal existence, whereas inferior animals arrive very soon, without contributing almost any thing to it themselves, at the small perfection of which they are capable, and there stop: man is qualified, and, as revelation fully assures us, designed, for endless improvement in goodness and happiness, but such as shall depend on his own care and industry, excited and assisted by the grace of God.

For this purpose, together with an inward perception of what is right and fit for us to do, and what is otherwise, we
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* Mic. vi. 8.

have also a faculty of self-reflexion, which, presenting us to our own view, shew us, what we have been and are. The exercise of this faculty is expressed in the text by *searching and trying our ways*; and elsewhere by *examining and proving ourselves**, and *knowing the thoughts of our hearts†*; which phrases have their peculiar import and use. For as the temper and state of our hearts is the great thing that we have to be concerned about in religion: so the consideration of our ways, or the actions in which our temper is exerted and shewn, must discover to us the motives that influence it: just as, in the material objects that surround us, we learn, from particular facts and appearances, the general laws by which the frame of things is governed.

This faculty of moral reflexion, and the self-approbation or dislike arising from it, which we commonly call by the name of *conscience*, is the character that distinguishes man from the beings below him; it is the principle that God hath endued with an evident right to direct our lives: and, according as we employ or disregard it, we shall advance or go back in real religion.

The seeds of every virtue were planted in the soul of man originally, each in its due order and proportion, without any mixture of evil. Yet even then, for want of due cultivation by our first parents, they were fatally blasted, instead of growing up to the perfection for which they were designed. But now, when our inward frame is so unhappily disordered and weakened by their fall, watchfulness over it is become unspeakably more necessary than it was at first. And since, with a nature thus prone to err, we are a considerable time from our birth before we reflect on our actions at all; and, after that, do it very imperfectly; it cannot fail, but our own bad inclinations, and the customs of a bad world, must have led us all aside, more or less, from the right path, before we knew distinctly which it was. Nor have we, many of us, it may be feared, made so early or so effectual an use, as we might, of the faculty of self-government, in that season of warm and hasty passions which quickly follows the first considerable use of reason. And, if not, we may be still surer of finding many things within us that want correction.

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* 1 Cor. xi. 23. 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

† Dan. ii. 30.

A great part of those around us, we see, are quite wicked. And in the few that are seriously good, the most superficial observer and most charitable interpreter will discern a great number of faults and imperfections unreformed. Since therefore failures in point of duty are, from the nature of the thing, to be apprehended, and have in fact happened to all the rest of the world: if we were not usually, by a most preposterous kind of negligence, less attentive to ourselves than to others, we should be likely to perceive the most disorders in that breast, with which we have the most opportunities of being intimately acquainted. But, at least, there is ground enough for us to examine, what our state really is: to *search and try our ways*; that, if we have erred in any thing, we may *turn again to the Lord*.

And though it is very apparent, that such a resolution may have many good consequences, and can have no bad ones, if executed in the manner, which every man's reason, and the word of God, will suggest to him: yet, for your further encouragement and direction, I shall lay before you particularly,

I. The advantages that may arise from this inquiry.

II. The chief things requisite for performing it aright.

I. The advantages that may arise from it.

A considerable part of the wrong conduct of mankind proceeds, not so much from any strong inclination to do amiss, as from being so unhappily thoughtless, that the slightest motive is enough to determine their choice any way. We engage at first in this or that sort of behaviour, we scarce know why or how: then go on of course in the way we have set out in, without thinking whither it leads us; and by use grow fond of it, and zealous for it; yet are too indolent all the while once to ask ourselves, perhaps, whether we are aiming at any thing; or, however, whether, it be at what we ought; or something of little importance, if not hurtful or criminal. Now this case, without reflexion, is quite irrecoverable; and a little reflexion in time would easily set all right. Nay, even where vehement passions hurry persons into follies and sins, it was for want of this wholesome discipline at first, that their passions gained the mastery; and applying it steadily for some time will be a sure means, through God's blessing, of reducing

them again to subjection. For there is no possibility, either of viewing a bad action, in a full light, without abhorrence, or of weighing its consequences without terror. Wickedness, therefore, always banishes thought, and piety and virtue encourage it. A good man, far from being driven to hide his inward condition from himself, though he find many things that want still to be amended, yet finds at the same time, so many, which, through the aid of God's Holy Spirit, are already grown, and daily growing better, that he feels no joy equal to that of his heart telling him, what he is. But the guilty mind is driven by fear and shame to stifle the voice of nature and conscience, that struggles in the breast for utterance. *Every one, that doeth evil, hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved: but he, that doeth truth, cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God**. And therefore the Psalmist speaks of self-amendment, as the immediate fruit of self-inspection. *I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies: I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments†*.

Nor doth it only excite in us good resolutions, but furnishes directions how to put them in practice. Reflexion will shew us, and nothing else can, by what defect within, or what opportunity without, each of our faults got ground in our breasts: and which is the way to root it out again. For want of this knowledge, multitudes try in vain to correct the disorders of their hearts and lives; and only here and there one recovers, as it were by force of constitution; whilst numbers perish, who might have been preserved by a competent acquaintance with the method of cure. For every single case requires to be in some degree differently treated; and must therefore, in order to it, be particularly studied. Strong resolutions indeed may sometimes do a great deal: but very often strength, unassisted by skill, wastes itself to no purpose: and the bad success of vehement efforts ill-directed leaves little ability, and less heart, for further endeavours.

Another use of searching frequently into our past ways, is to preserve ourselves from the secret approach of future dangers. The first deviation from their duty is in most persons
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* John iii. 20, 21.

† Psal. cxix. 59, 60.

but small ; and its progress, for some time, gentle and unnoticed by themselves ; till they have insensibly gone such a length, that they are tempted to despair of being able to return. And therefore attending to little errors is the safest method to prevent great ones. But even where we have yet been guilty of none, observation will shew us many tendencies, that we have to sin ; many weak and exposed places in our minds, unlikely to withstand the assaults, that must be expected in such a world as this. And hence we shall be forewarned to avoid the temptations that will endanger us ; to prepare ourselves for such as we cannot avoid ; and strengthen our inward frame with such care, that it may be proof against the various accidents of life.

Till this is done in some good degree, reflexion, though always of the highest use, will often be very unpleasing, by setting before our eyes the disagreeable view of our faults. But when we have tolerably well reformed and fortified our minds, then the exercise of it will grow delightful, every day beyond other. And when once we can say to ourselves, on sure grounds, that *we have fought the good fight**, and gotten the victory, and have only the scattered remains of the enemy left to pursue and destroy ; how inexpressible will the satisfaction be to enjoy the approbation of our own hearts, and the consciousness of God's favour ; to look back and see the dangers, from which we are escaped ; to feel within, that a temper of piety and virtue is indeed the happiness of man ; and experience the continual increase of that temper, continually diminishing our burthens and sorrows, and opening to us new scenes of enjoyment, to which we were strangers before !

All these are general advantages flowing from the practice of self-inspection. But in many cases it hath yet a more especial good influence. A distinct knowledge of ourselves will greatly secure us from the ill effects of flattery, which would persuade us that we are what we feel we are not ; and enable us to bear unjust reproach, thinking it *a very small thing that we should be judged of man's judgement*, when we can reflect with comfort, that *he who judgeth us is the Lord†*. Experience of our infirmities will teach us humility, and move us to compassion and forgiveness, according to the apostle's direction : *Bre-*

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thren,

* 2 Tim. iv. 7.

† 1 Cor. iv. 3.

*thren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted**. Experience where our strength, as well as our weakness lies, will shew us, how we are best able to serve God and our fellow-creatures; what we may attempt, what will be too much for us. And strict observation of our own hearts will qualify us, beyond all things, to give useful cautions to others, and direct their steps in the right way.

But, in order to receive these or any benefits from self-inquiry, there are,

II. Some rules to be observed for conducting it properly.

Of these the fundamental one is, that we consider it as a religious duty; perform it as in the presence of God; and earnestly beg him, to shew us in a true light to ourselves. *Who can tell how oft he offendeth? O cleanse thou me from my secret faults†. Try me, O God, and seek the ground of my heart: prove me, and examine my thoughts. Look well, if there be any way of wickedness in me: and lead me in the way everlasting‡.* A serious regard to the most awful, and yet most gracious of beings, will be a constant preservative against all the errors, however opposite, to which we are liable in this matter.

Some are so very sensible before-hand of their own condition in general, that they are afraid of examining into it particularly: or, if they do begin the inquiry, they have not courage to carry it on. For the more we reflect on our faults, the more we must feel that shame and remorse, which God hath placed in our minds, as he hath done the sense of pain in our bodies, to restrain us from proceeding in what would destroy us. Now most persons are willing to recover their bodily health, how much soever they suffer in the cure: but to regain a right state of soul, on which all depends, they will bear nothing. So, because their condition is bad, they let it go on to be daily worse; rather than have the uneasiness of thinking of it, to make it better. Yet neglecting to look into our worldly affairs, because we think them desperate, every one owns to be wrong: and must it not then be infinitely more so in our eternal concerns, which can never be desperate, but from our refusing

* Gal. vi. 1.

† Psal. xix. 12.

‡ Psal. cxxxix. 23, 24.

refusing to look into them? As soon, therefore, as any one finds an aversion to self-inquiry beginning, he should instantly break through it, set about the work, and never stop till he hath finished it. For then is the season of trial, that in all likelihood may determine his state for ever after. The aversion will increase, if we yield to it; and the habit of sin grow stronger: the next effort will be still more uneasy, and consequently fainter, than the present; and all will end in a total despair of becoming what we ought. Yet, at the same time, we must reflect now and then, whether we will or not: and may, even by transient thoughts, undergo more pain to no purpose, than would have wrought a cure. But should any thing happen, as many may, to awaken us in a full and lasting view of our condition, when perhaps we may be so far enslaved to sin, as to practise it on, with our eyes open to all its horrors; this would be a dreadful scene indeed. Or could we be so fatally successful, as to banish thought intirely; it would only be losing the sense of part of our misery, and, with it, all hope of happiness.

Let us therefore neither be too tender, nor too proud, to bear inspecting our hearts and lives: and, that we may bear it well, let us learn to moderate, if we have need, the uneasiness which it may give us. For every passion that we have may be raised so high, as to defeat its own end. And though we can dislike nothing so justly, as our faults; and very few dislike them near enough; yet if we dislike ourselves for them too much to have patience to think of them, and mend them; that runs into a new fault: and we should check ourselves for it, mildly indeed, but very carefully; considering well both our natural frailty, and our Maker's goodness: but especially the promises of forgiveness and grace, which he hath recorded for our use in his holy word; not in order to reconcile us at all to sin, but in a reasonable degree to ourselves. And how mortifying soever a needful examination may still prove, it is surely worth while to support the most painful reflexions for the present, when it will secure us a succession of pleasing and happy ones ever after; and verify that encouraging account, which the son of *Sirach* hath given of this whole matter: *Wisdom ex-*
alteth

alteth her children, and layeth hold of them that seek her. He that holdeth her fast shall inherit glory : and wheresoever she enters, the Lord will bless.——At first she will walk with him by crooked ways, and bring fear and dread upon him, and torment him with her discipline ; until she may trust his soul, and try him by her laws. Then will she return the strait way unto him, and comfort him, and shew him her secrets. But if he go wrong she will forsake him and give him over to his own ruin. Observe the opportunity and beware of evil.*

But most persons are in the contrary extreme to this over-great sensibility ; and by no means apprehend sufficiently, *what Spirit they are of†*, or what lives they have led. The course of behaviour to which we are inclined, especially if we have fallen into it early, and find others do not scruple it, we are very unwilling to suspect of any thing wrong ; very apt to stifle our suspicions, if they rise ; and to take it much amiss, if others intimate their judgment of, what surely we ought to understand best, our own conduct. Therefore, before we can at all depend on the good opinion we may entertain of ourselves, we should ask our hearts, and make them answer honestly : have we searched our ways at all ? Have we searched the whole of them ? And have we done it with impartiality and diligence ? Or winked a little, where we did not care to look ; forgot a few things, that we had no pleasure in remembering ; and coloured over what we found, without it ; would appear disagreeable ? A fond affection, even to others, can make us wonderfully blind to their defects : and much more may it in our own case. So that, unless we have examined with great accuracy, though *we know nothing by ourselves, yet are we not thereby justified‡* : and what we may call the testimony of our conscience, may be given so unfairly as to be of no weight. *For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.* But let every man PROVE his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself§. Let us, therefore, carry always in our minds the instructive remark of Solomon, that, *every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord pondereth the hearts||*. And let us be careful so to ponder and judge our own hearts now, that we may be

* Eccus. iv. 11.—20.

§ Gal. vi. 3, 4.

† Luke ix. 55.

|| Prov. xxi. 2.

‡ 1 Cor. iv. 4.

be able, through the mercy procured for us by our blessed Redeemer, to stand his final judgement hereafter.

Nor must we examine only into the weak and suspicious parts of our characters and conduct: but those which procure us the most applause from others and ourselves: for want of which, even vices, a little disguised, may pass upon us for great virtues; and we may be doing, with entire satisfaction, what we should abhor, if we understood it right. This is the way to grow in love with our faults, instead of correcting them; and therefore we should often call to mind that surprising, but too common, character of the church of *Laodicea*; *thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing: and knowest not, that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked**.

Nor are these general grounds of caution the only ones; but every person will find, on inquiry, particular reasons for being watchful and distrustful of himself, in some point or other; arising, perhaps, from unhappy experience of failures, at least from conviction of the dangers, incident to his natural disposition, age, employment, company; and, which is a matter of no small consideration, rank in the world. For they, above all, should be careful in searching their own breasts, whose higher condition subjects them most to flattery, and removes them farthest from hearing censure.

But though it is very uncommon for persons to carry their suspicions of themselves far enough, yet we may carry them too far; especially if we examine ourselves, as it may be most people do, only or chiefly when we are under some strong degree of sorrow or fear. For then we shall be apt not only to suffer groundless uneasiness, by thinking much too ill of our present state, which is by no means a duty: but to despair, and lay aside the endeavour of becoming better, which would be a destructive error. The proper time for self-inspection, therefore, is, when we are in the calmest and evenest state of mind, neither careless and presumptuous, nor terrified and desponding. And we should often repeat the work, place ourselves and our actions in different points of view, and compare the result of our several observations, that one may rectify or confirm another.

* Rev. iii. 17.

other. Nor will it be at all sufficient to see what we have been and are, without consulting the word of God, as well as our consciences, which may else misguide us, to learn what we ought to be. And though it would be an unhappy weakness to affright or entangle ourselves, by imagining the rule of our duty stricter than it is; yet it may be a fatal mistake to flatter ourselves, by imagining it less strict: and the plain way is, first to judge of it reasonably and uprightly, then to try our condition by it impartially and frequently. The more constant we are in doing this, the easier, the more beneficial, the more satisfactory, it will be: whereas long intervals will only give time for ill habits to strengthen and multiply, till we shall have no heart to attempt a reformation of them.

And though the closest attendance on this duty may, at present, be far from producing all the good fruit we could wish, it should never discourage us from proceeding in what we know to be necessary. Beginnings in almost every thing are laborious and imperfect: and we make a slow progress at first, even in what afterwards we come to excel in. The smallest step we can take towards self-amendment is advancing somewhat towards happiness: and if our zeal continue, our difficulties will assuredly lessen, and our proficiency grow quicker. For though *of ourselves we can do nothing**; yet *God giveth power to the faint: and to them that have no might, he increaseth strength. They that wait on the Lord shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint†*.

And as the worst of men ought not to give up themselves as incapable of becoming good, nor those in the lowest rank of goodness to despair of becoming eminent in time; so neither should those who are in the highest indulge too great a complacency in their own improvements; much less a contempt of others, or an imagination, which the great apostle disclaims, *as though they had already attained, either were already perfect*. But the common duty of all, to express it in his following words, is, *forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, to press towards the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus†*. Which that we may all obtain, be of his infinite mercy grant, &c.

* John xv. 5. 2 Cor. iii. 5. † Isa. xl. 29, 31. ‡ Phil. iii. 12, 13, 14.

SERMON LXVI.

TRUE RELIGION, THE EVIDENCE OF A GOOD UNDERSTANDING.

PROV. ix. 10.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the Holy is understanding.

WE all naturally desire happiness: we all know, that obtaining it greatly depends on a wise choice of our conduct in life: and yet very few examine, with any care, what conduct is likeliest to procure us the felicity that we seek. The livelier part of the world, hurried along by a giddy tumult of passions and fancies, venture, with a most intrepid gaiety of heart, on whatever looks pleasing to them: and are in much too great haste for present gratification, ever to stay and once think, what may be the consequences, either to others, or even to themselves. The good-natured and flexible are easily drawn to follow the more active and enterprising of their acquaintance; and the thoughtless and indolent find it unspeakably the least trouble to let themselves be borne along by the tide of custom and fashion, just as it flows and ebbs by turns. Yet surely reason doth not make part of our nature for no purpose; nor experience discover any thing more plainly, than the numberless miseries that proceed from going on thus at all adventures.

Those, therefore, who are a little more considerate, take a different course: yet often scarce a better, and sometimes a worse. They despise the weakness of being caught with every bait of present pleasure, or abandoning their lives to the direction of mere chance; and follow, with great attention, art and industry, what the world calls their interest. But this being their only view, the disappointed are totally miserable; and,

more or less, all are disappointed; the far greatest part, very grievously. And the small remainder, who seem to attain their wishes, betray, under the fairest shew of outward prosperity, evident tokens, that they have very little inward enjoyment to compensate for the many and long anxieties that usually precede. Few things come up, even at first, to what they promised: and such as do, fall below it very soon; leaving the mind, at best, languid and unsatisfied. But if such persons have taken, as they commonly do take, forbidden ways, amongst others, to their ends; then additional uneasinesses crowd in upon them: painful reflections on their past behaviour; solicitous apprehensions of what may follow, both here and hereafter. For there is deeply rooted in the heart of man an inbred sense of right and wrong; which, however heedlessly overlooked, or studiously suppressed by the gay or the busy part of the world, will, from time to time, make them both feel, that it hath the justest authority to govern all that we do, as well as power to reward with the truest consolation, and punish with the acutest remorse.

Others, therefore, see the absolute necessity of bringing virtue and duty into the account, when they deliberate concerning the behaviour that leads to happiness. And were the regard, which they pay to these, universal and uniform, their happiness would be as complete as human nature and circumstances permit. But too often they, who practise conscientiously some duties, with strange inconsistency, utterly despise others. And, which is stranger yet, many, who profess the most generous concern for moral obligations, quite forget the first and strongest of them all, the reverence due to him who made us. The ties, which unite them to their fellow-creatures, they readily acknowledge: but unaccountably slight their absolute dependence on their Creator, and the consequent veneration, which they owe to that being, *of whom, and for whom, and to whom are all things* *. Now if any dispositions are good, religious ones are such. They proceed from the same principle, with the very best of others: the exercise of them is the noblest exertion of that principle; and yet some affect to set up virtue in opposition to piety; and would be thought desirous to serve the

* 1 Cor. viii. 6. Heb. ii. 10. Rom. xi. 36.

the former, by deprecating the latter. Some again, who are more upon their guard, yet explain themselves freely, on occasion, to allow nothing further than this; that religion may be of use to keep the bulk of mankind in order: not reflecting, that the upper part have still greater need of its restraints, than the lower; and that whenever it comes to be spoken of, as only an instrument of policy, it will be no longer so much as that. But lighter minds run wilder lengths by far: and absolutely indifferent what harm may come of it, perpetually treat all sacred subjects, as if freedom of thought about them consisted in pouring the utmost contempt upon them that was possible.

Yet perhaps very few, if any, of these, would they consult their hearts honestly, do so much as imagine they have any reason to doubt, but a world, so visibly full of beautiful order and gracious design, must have been first formed, and be still governed by a most powerful, intelligent, and beneficent cause. This, the least degree of consideration, how else the frame of things could be what it is, will sufficiently shew: and every advance in the knowledge of nature, makes the proof, in proportion, fuller and more obvious. If then there exists a sovereign of the universe, almighty and all-wise, it cannot be a matter that we are unconcerned in. He, by whose pleasure we are, and according to whose determinations about us we shall be happy or miserable, is not a being unrelated to us: nor, while he continually superintends every thing else on this earth with the exactest care, will he ever neglect the worthiest object, which it presents to his view, the affections and behaviour of his rational creature, man. He must expect every thing to act, as its nature requires. And having distinguished ours with the knowledge of himself; he cannot have left it in our choice, to lay him aside out of our thoughts, as if we knew him not: but must have intended, that we should pay him those regards, which are his due.

Now the first of these, and the foundation of all the rest, is a proper temperature of fear and love: two affections, which ought never to be separated in thinking of God; and, therefore, whichsoever is expressed implies the other. The text hath mentioned only *fear*: but evidently means that kind, which children feel towards a wise and good parent; which the Psalmist had in his thoughts, when he said, *there is mercy with*

*thee : therefore shalt thou be feared**. As God is infinitely good, and hath not only bestowed on us all the temporal blessings, that we enjoy ; but offered us, on the most equitable terms, through the mediation of his blessed Son, and the grace of his Holy Spirit, pardon of our sins, assistance of our weakness, and everlasting life ; surely he is amiable in the highest degree : and insensibility to his goodness, whilst we are moved with the faint shadows of it in his creatures, would be shocking depravity. But then he is also inconceivably awful ; absolute in authority, resistless in power : we and all nature are intirely in his hands, and depend on the breath of his mouth. Such a being, we must own, *is greatly to be feared, and had in reverence of the highest of them that are round about him*† : much more then ought the sons of men to contemplate him with abasement, and even *rejoice in him with trembling*‡. Far is this from being below the firmest and the bravest soul. Not to feel a dread of God, must be the grossest stupidity : and not to own it, the most impotent affectation. A worthy heart will think pride against its Maker the extremity of wickedness : and value itself on expressing zealously that loyal and thankful submission, which is due so justly to the King of all ; that faithful and affectionate obedience, which his precepts claim, who hath bought us to himself, with his blood : that respectful and ready compliance to which his holy motions are intitled, who graciously *worketh in us both to will and to do*§. In these things consists the true *fear of the Lord* ! For as the text, though conceived in the most general terms, undoubtedly comprehended at first the whole of Jewish piety, we ought to understand it now, as comprehending the whole of christian. And that practising this, is the true wisdom of man, I shall proceed to shew you distinctly, by considering its influence

I. On the conduct,

II. On the enjoyment of our lives.

I. On our conduct.

Some indeed, mistaking the dictates of sensuality and vanity for those of reason, presume to speak of the author of our nature, as if, by giving us the several inclinations belonging to it, he had warranted the unrestrained indulgence of them all :
and

* Psal. cxxx. 4.

† Psal. lxxxix. 7.

‡ Psal. ii. 11.

§ Phil. ii. 13.

and so would make his being of no consequence to our actions. But a little reflection will easily confute so wild an imagination; and shew us, with how great propriety the wise king hath said, that *the knowledge of the holy is understanding*. He, who is perfectly holy and righteous himself, must have regard to what is right and fit in others. He, who hath provided with such fatherly care for the common good of us all, can never have left us at liberty to defeat his purpose, by injuring and corrupting one another, and filling his world with confusion and misery at our pleasure. He hath not planted in us passions, affections, and appetites, to grow up wild as accident directs; but to be diligently superintended, weeded and pruned, and each confined to its proper bounds. He hath not endued us with a principle of conscience, to be overborne by resentments and interests, drowned in sensual gratifications, led captive by fashions and fancies: but to be cultivated and improved; and then obeyed, as the guide of life. Its authority is derived from himself: and its judgement upon us will be finally affirmed by his own. For it cannot be, that the sovereign of all the earth should either fail to reward such as dutifully promote his gracious designs, or let any one be a gainer by acting in contradiction to them. These things every person's own heart, if permitted, will tell him very plainly. But our understandings are unhappily prejudiced in favour of our bad inclinations: and were they less so, the unassisted reason of fallen man is able to trace out but a very imperfect system of religion. And therefore to complete the assurance of its great truths, express revelation from above hath given us undeniable evidence, that universal virtue is God's law, and eternal happiness or misery its sanctions: adding at the same time whatever more particular notices, directions, and encouragements our condition wanted. Now what can possibly influence men, like such a motive so enforced? And how weakly must they judge, or how ill must they mean, who would abandon so solid a foundation of right behaviour, to lay the stress of so important a building on any other!

It would both be unjust and unwise to reject the smallest inducement to any part of goodness: for we greatly need every one that we can have. But it is extremely requisite to observe, where our chief security lies, and place our chief trust there. The reasonableness, the dignity, the beauty of virtue, are doubt-
less

less natural, and ought to be strong recommendations of it. But how faint impressions do they make on the ignorant and slow of apprehension, on minds agitated with passions, or hardened in sins ! and indeed how soon do such impressions, if single and unsupported, fade away out of all minds, or dwindle into mere speculation, amidst the temptations of a bad world, the allurements of sense, and the treacheries of a *deceitful heart* * ! Again : the temporal advantages of virtue and bad effects of wickedness, ordinarily speaking, are weighty arguments. But still, how often doth that weight fall on the wrong side ; or give little help, if any, to the right ! In short, many incitements to think and act as we ought, are in general useful : but none is at all times sufficient, excepting only the fear of God *taught as the truth is in Jesus* †.

This is one unchangeable motive, level to the apprehension of every person, extending to the practice of every duty, including at once every moral disposition of heart, and every prudent regard to our own good. There needs but a thought to bring it with such force to our minds, as will check the strongest passions, curb the most extravagant levity of spirit, overbalance the greatest temporal advantages ; and make whatever is our duty appear, in the strongest light, to be our interest. The fear of God can pierce the inmost recesses of our minds, and search the rightness of our most secret desires. Reflecting well what his eyes sees there, will make us see it in a point of view, that we never should else ; and put us on approving our souls to him by simplicity and truth : no longer attempting, as unhappily we are too prone, to cheat others and ourselves with false appearances ; but faithfully bewailing all our past faults, and watchfully guarding against all future ones, particularly, the consciousness of having such a witness to each action and purpose, must powerfully incline us to be very composed and moderate in every proceeding, very mild and reasonable towards every person. Reverence of God's authority will make us fear to injure the meanest of our fellow-creatures ; since even he is under the protection of the Almighty. And hope of sharing in his bounty will teach us to imitate it by the tenderest exercise of humanity and compassion. Thus influenced, those of higher rank would be public blessings and examples :

* Jer. xvii. 9.

† Eph. iv. 21.

examples: their inferiors would love and honour his image impressed upon them: and all would endeavour to fill worthily whatever station the wisdom of providence allotted them: discharging conscientiously the duties of the most laborious, and counting it an honour to serve God in the least considerable.

But let us now enquire,

II. What effect the fear of God must have on the enjoyment of our lives.

Unquestionably it will make bad people uneasy. But then it is both for the world's good, and their own, that they should be so. It is not their thinking of their condition, that renders it a dreadful one. The less they feel it, the worse it is: and feeling it to purpose will be the happiest thing possible for them. Farther: this fear doubtless restrains persons from dissolute pleasures, and dishonourable means of obtaining profit, power, and advancement. But so doth virtue: so for the most part doth common prudence. And religion never forbids us even a hurtful gratification, but it offers us happiness hereafter in return for our present self-denial. Farther still: we must own, it gives a peculiar seriousness and awe to the mind of man. But we have need to be kept in order by a sense of God's parental authority: and without it should quickly become ungovernable, mischievous, and wretched. He requires us not in the least to be gloomy and comfortless; or full of terrors, while we mean to do well: but freely permits us the cheerfullest use of all our faculties, that is consistent with innocence, and with making improvement in goodness our chief care, as it will be our chief felicity.

And if the thought of him doth moderate the liveliness of over-gay dispositions; it prevents, by so doing, many great evils, into which they would otherwise hurry us; and fills us with much more inward and deeply-felt satisfactions, than those light and trifling ones, that only play upon the surface of an inconsiderate mind. Or did that composure, which piety introduces, lessen our enjoyments for a time; yet, being what our state on earth, which is in many respects a serious one, demands; if we are wise, we shall gladly conform ourselves to the condition which God hath placed us in; and trust him, that the consequences will be happy.

Such indeed will every one, who makes the trial, soon find them. What pleasure can be greater, than a full persuasion,
that

that our behaviour is approved by him, who knows our hearts, and will reward with his friendship whatever we do aright? The world is generally a negligent spectator, and too often an unfair interpreter, of the best actions. This cannot but give uneasiness and discouragement to virtue, unless it be animated by nobler views. But the recollection, that God looks on with esteem, sets us above the censures of men, and even above their applauses. For were all mankind to join in doing justice to exalted merit; how poor would the recompence be, and how low the delight, compared with his, who can lay open his principles and his behaviour, with humble confidence, before the Judge of all!

Then as to the sufferings of this life; which, very frequently make up a great share of it; religion entirely prevents many of them, by withholding us from the sins and the follies that commonly bring them upon us. And it wonderfully diminishes the rest, by loosening our attachments to what we must expect to be disappointed in, or separated from; and leading us, from the *broken cisterns* of worldly comfort, to God *the fountain of living waters**; in the assurance of whose grace, our great interest is safe, under every change; and by the superintendency of whose providence *all things work together for our good*†. What are the poor consolations of philosophy, or the amusements, which thoughtless minds take refuge in, to deceive their sorrows, compared with such cheering reflections as these! Still, what is naturally painful, must be felt so; but the insupportable part of every affliction is taken away, when we consider it, as ordered by him, whose right to dispose of us we must acknowledge, and of whose kind intention to us we may always be sure

A heart, habitually formed to such meditations as these, with what serenity must it pass through its allotted pilgrimage here below! It hath nothing to fear: it hath nothing to hide, from others or itself. It can bear solitude, and its own inspection. It can even rejoice in the sense of his presence, who is to others inexpressibly terrible; but to the pious soul an immovable ground of security, an inexhaustible source of happiness. For indeed what greater happiness can we wish to ourselves, than to be placed under the fatherly guidance of infinite foresight

* Jer. ii. 13.

† Rom. viii. 28.

fight and power; borne up under all the calamities of life; and, which is the great point, exalted with the noblest hopes of what shall follow after death!

Our time on earth is so short; and our pleasures at best so languid and rare, and mixed with so many anxieties, pains and sorrows; that surely it is a melancholy view, to think of ending here; and after a very few days are gone over our heads, becoming for ever, as if we had never been. Yet this is much more than irreligious persons can possibly promise themselves. Could there be no God, they would have no certainty, but that their beings might continue, and might be miserable. For what is there that may not be, on the supposition of an ungoverned world? But since there is a God; slighting and disobeying him must be crimes, and must be punished. We may have little attention to this perhaps, in the tumult of youthful fancies and worldly pursuits. But when the close of the scene approaches, and age or sickness rouses up reflection from its sleep, then will the sinner, in all likelihood, see, with terror unspeakable, those awful realities, of which, if he is never convinced in this world, he will only be the more wretched in the next. But the darkest hour to such, may, with reason, be the joyfullest to him, who having faithfully acknowledged God in all his ways, perceives that now his work is over, and his reward at hand. Undoubtedly it is best to use no stronger expressions on this subject, than the less experienced may feel to be just: else, words want force to describe the difference between these two conditions. It is true, not all pious souls are conscious of it, just at the time of their departure. Frequently their setting sun is obscured by insensibility: sometimes over-cast by doubts and fears. But they shall instantly behold it rising again, to shine with unclouded and encreasing lustre to all eternity. For *light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness* *.

Such then is the good influence of the fear of God: and his genuine fear can have no bad one. Reverence of a wise and holy being will never mislead men into any thing wicked or weak. False religion, indeed, may do both: and so may false notions of virtue or friendship, or any other valuable quality.

VOL. II.

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But

* Ps. xcvi. 11, 12.

But this was never thought an argument in any case besides, against being governed by the true; and yet less ought it in the present. God *must be worshipped* by us *in spirit and in truth* *, let others worship him as wrongly as they will: and his laws must be obeyed, let ever so many mistake errors of their own for such. The danger of superstition is a very powerful reason, why religious belief and practice should be watched over, and directed right: but cannot possibly be a reason, why dissolute profaneness should be encouraged or suffered. Let rational piety be thoroughly established, and superstition falls of course. But if the former be rooted out, the latter will certainly grow up in its place. There is a natural bent in human minds to believe and respect an invisible power: and if it be turned aside from pointing, in a proper manner, towards its proper object, it will soon acquire some other form; probably an absurd and pernicious one. Infidelity promises great freedom and enjoyment of life: but in fact it proves, in proportion as it prevails, a state of madness and confusion, of perpetual danger from others, of discomfort and desperate resolutions within mens own breasts: and therefore, after some trial of it, they will eagerly run away from it into the opposite extreme.

True religion then being of such importance, there are some things, which may justly be expected of mankind in its favour.

1. That they, who have not yet carefully searched into the grounds of it, should not take upon them to treat it with scorn, or even disregard. What so deeply concerns all men, and what the wisest and most considerate of men have lived and died in the firm belief of, ought not surely to be thrown aside, on hearing only a few superficial objections, and ludicrous turns of words to its disadvantage. There must need more than this to confute it; and therefore whoever, with little reading and little thought, finds much inclination to disbelieve, should learn to suspect himself, instead of his creed, and be modest in proportion to his unacquaintedness with the subject.

2. It may be expected also, that they, who profess to examine, should do it fairly. Most men will be backward to confess, that they wish against religion: because it is confessing, that

* John iv. 24.

that they have reason to fear, if the universe be well governed. But each ought to think well, whether this be not secretly his case, and remove the prepossession of his bad life, before he pretends to be an upright judge. After that, if he finds difficulties, let him remember, that they are to be found in every thing, and yet something must be true. If he meets not with the sort, or the degree of evidence, which he looked for: let him recollect, that a fair mind will be satisfied with any that turns the scale. If he doubts of some points; let him still hold fast those, which remain undoubted; and preserve that respect to religion in general, which will prove his best guide in every particular. Nay, were it possible for him to doubt of the whole; yet, since doubt is not certainty, his practice however should be on the safer side. And if he sees, as one should think he must, that scepticism and infidelity will destroy the chief comfort of the good, endanger the virtue of all, and weaken the bonds of civil society; never let the poor vanity of propagating his notions tempt him to be the author or promoter, of so dreadful a mischief to human kind. But

3. The last, and most important thing of all to be expected is, that they who are so happy as to believe, should secure and complete their happiness by what alone can do it, a suitable behaviour. Too often the contrary course is taken: and many who had once some regard for religion, but unhappily accompanied with vicious indulgencies, force themselves to throw it off, that they may sin undisturbed. But let no one imagine, that denying God will make the least amends for disobeying him; or that stifling our convictions can ever give any true peace; which is only to be had by enforcing them home on our hearts, and conforming our lives to them. This we have all need to do with the utmost care, amidst so many, so powerful, so sudden temptations to the contrary, as the world and the devil, and our own corrupt nature, throw in our way. And as the reverence of our heavenly Father is the most effectual preservative, we ought to keep up that in its full strength, by frequently repeating fervent prayer to him, and affecting meditations upon him. How intirely the exercises of devotion are laid aside by some; and with what indifference, and even contempt, a mere outward shew of them, now and then, is just retained by others, who yet call themselves christians; too many of you, I fear, know too well: and it furnishes matter of me-

lancholy reflection, not only to every pious, but every prudent mind. For good men must feel, that the regard, due to God, is a most inward, constant and awful one : and wise men must surely perceive, that neither can the common welfare be preserved without morals ; nor morals, without religion ; nor religion, without worship ; private worship, to strengthen our own sense of duty ; and public worship, to spread it amongst others.

On all accounts, therefore, it is our most important concern to cultivate and express the affections of piety ; which are indeed the noblest movements of our souls towards the worthiest object, towards the attainment of the most blessed end : and to awaken ourselves from the remissness, into which we are apt to fall, on his head beyond others, by reminding our hearts often, that God is present, and a future state soon will be so ; and how soon to any of us, none can tell. May we all resolve, from this moment, to strive earnestly for a happy share in it, through faith in the merits of our dear Redeemer, and a right use of the suggestions of the divine Spirit : to both whom, with the Father Almighty, be honour and praise, now and for ever ! Amen.

S E R M O N LXVII.

THE MEANING OF THE EXPRESSION, OF TAKING UP
THE CROSS.

M A R K. viii. 34.

And when he had called the people unto him, with his disciples also; he said unto them, whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

EVERY word, which proceeded out of the mouth of our blessed Lord, must unquestionably deserve a very serious attention. But some things being peculiarly needful to be known, or liable to be forgotten; to these, on proper occasions, he demanded the especial regard of his hearers: and as they were bound to pay it, so are we. Thus in the foregoing chapter, finding it requisite to confute the Jewish traditions in favour of that ceremonial purity in their persons and food, which led them to overlook the moral purity of the heart, we are told, that *when he had called all the people unto him, he said, hearken unto me every one of you, and understand. There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him, but the things which come out of him, wicked thoughts and their consequences, those are they that defile the man: if any man hath ears to hear, let him hear**. With the same kind of solemnity he delivered the words of the text: which indeed had still greater need of it, as the former contradicted only received opinions and customs; but these, the strongest of our natural passions and appetites. *When he had called, &c.*

Taking up the cross relates, in the primary and strict sense, only to suffering patiently for the truth†: a duty, God be thanked, less common amongst us at present, and which therefore

* Mark vii. 14, 15, 16.

† Vid. Suicer in *Synagoga*, p. 1005.

fore I shall pass over. In its larger acceptation it will be found to coincide with *self-denial*: a word of great importance to be rightly apprehended, because it expresses here the condition, on which alone we shall be acknowledged the true followers of Christ. The terms of salvation are indeed elsewhere laid before us in phrases more intelligible at first sight: but illustrating this darker one will not only contribute to prove that the different views of the christian doctrine are all consistent with each other, but discover to us the principal cause of our acting wrong, with the most effectual method of amendment, perhaps more fully, than any thing else can. I shall therefore endeavour,

- I. To explain the literal meaning of the expression:
- II. To shew with what limitations it must be understood:
- III. To set before you the obligation of the duty, comprehended under it; and its importance to our virtue and our happiness.

I. To explain the literal meaning of the expression.

We speak every day of denying ourselves such or such a pleasure, that is refusing to ourselves the enjoyment of it. But the scripture sense goes much beyond this, and extends to renouncing and disowning ourselves; throwing out of our thoughts the relation that we bear to our own persons; and behaving with as little indulgence, as if a mere stranger to us, were in question. Of course we have in general the most concern for those of whom we have the most knowledge. And hence, in the sacred books, knowing or owing any one signifies having a regard for him: and denying any one, the contrary. Thus wicked persons are said to *deny God, while they profess to know him**, and our Saviour in return will deny them at the great day, saying, *depart from me, I know you not†*. Thus also, in the Old Testament, when the children of Levi had suppressed a rebellion of the people against God and their lawful governors, by falling without distinction upon all whom they found engaged in it, *Moses* describes the heroic behaviour of that tribe in these terms: *who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him, neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children; for he observed thy*
word

* Tit. i. 16. † Matth. vii. 23. xxv. 12. Luke xiii. 25, 27.

word and kept thy covenant*: That is, they preferred their duty to heaven and the public, before the tenderest private regards. *Job* comes yet nearer to the phrase before us: *though I were perfect*, which he had just been disclaiming, *yet would I not know my soul†*; were I freer from faults than I am, it should not tempt me to self-partiality.

But indeed the context may suffice to shew the meaning of the text. Our Saviour had been foretelling his future sufferings. *Peter's* warm zeal for his master overpowered his respect, and he *began to rebuke him, saying, be it far from thee, Lord, this shall not be unto thee‡*. But the holy *Jesus* immediately rebukes him in return before the disciples; tells him he was, in the tendency, though not the design of his words, a tempter, an adversary to him; and influenced by human weakness, instead of religious fortitude. *Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men§*. Then calling the people to him also, but in kindness to the well-meaning apostle, concealing from them the particular occasion, he assures them, with that noble disinterestedness, which he shewed perpetually, that if they would become his disciples indeed, they must *deny themselves* and follow him: disregard, as he did and should do, every instinct and aversion, every passion and affection that belong to the human frame||. And harsh as this declaration may seem, he hath used a harsher yet. *If any man come to me, and bute not his father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple¶*. Agreeably to which, *St. Paul* sets it down at the head of a long catalogue of most dreadful sins, that *men shall be lovers of their own selves***. But now it will be thought full time, that a doctrine so alarming should

II. Be put under due limitations.

For, after all, self-love being a part of that nature, which God hath given us, can we, or ought we to divest ourselves of it? Is there any possibility of happiness without it? Doth not religion apply to it as our main principle of action, recommend its precepts chiefly from their tendency to our good; and

* Dent. xxxiii. 9.

† Matth. xvi. 21, 22.

‡ See authorities of the fathers for this interpretation in Suicer,

voc. *Απαρνησας Αρνησις*,

¶ Luke xiv. 26.

† Job. ix. 21.

§ Matth. xvi. 23,

** 2 Tim. iii. 2.

and even make our own *love to our selves* the measure and rule of that, which we ought to have for *our neighbour**? Why, doubtless these things are true: and so evidently true, that we may be sure our blessed Saviour, whose life was in no respect unnecessarily austere, and whose doctrine is every where else so rational and mild, could never intend to require in the text, and the few others that resemble it, either that we should deny and disregard ourselves intirely, which is impracticable; or uselessly, which would be unfit. And therefore, as he could not, without the utmost unreasonableness, be suspected of forbidding a prudent and virtuous self-love, he might safely and advantageously employ the strongest terms in prohibiting a weak and vicious one: for in such cases abatements at least sufficient hardly ever fail of being made. However, to prevent mistakes and misrepresentations, he hath taught us more particularly, how to interpret all his injunctions of this kind, by interpreting himself the hardest of them, (that of *bating every thing which we naturally hold dear*) to bear only the comparative sense of *loving nothing more than him*†, but preferring obedience to the laws of God before any other consideration. For in the strict and literal meaning, his apostle hath told us, *no man ever yet hated his own flesh*‡.

Had he enjoined us a number of difficult observances, of which we saw not the use, we ought certainly to have believed they had one, and obeyed him implicitly. But since, on the contrary, he hath established a spiritual religion, neither imposing unaccountable restraints, nor encumbered with many or troublesome ceremonies; we ought, both to receive it with most joyful reverence, and to preserve it in that amiable simplicity, in which he delivered it: not laying on ourselves any burthen, but such as may enable us to bear the better what he hath laid on us; and much less usurping dominion over the practice of others.

Extremely ill therefore hath the church of *Rome* understood the nature of christianity, in appointing as proper instances of self-denial, so many frivolous and vexatious austerities of abstinences and penances, that serve to no good purpose; and encouraging multitudes to make vows of living separate from the world in poverty and celibacy, only to spend a tedious
life

* Matth. xxij. 39.

† Matth. x. 37.

‡ Eph. v. 29.

life in the meritorious employments of wearing different habits, eating different food, keeping different hours, and observing different rules in common things from the rest of their fellow-creatures and from one another : as if it could be the intention of infinite wisdom and goodness to set men on finding out new ways of being uneasy and absurd. They plead indeed, that such methods habituate them to a spirit of obedience, and a readiness of parting with their own inclinations. But obedience to God cannot be shewn by doing what he never commanded ; and blind obedience to mere men he hath cautioned us against, instead of requiring it. We are to *deny ourselves and follow Christ* : not to *deny ourselves and follow* guides, equally fallible with ourselves, into whatever extravagances they direct, that will only produce ignorance and bigotry in one part of the world, and contempt and abhorrence of religion in the other. But these additional duties, which the church enjoins, they say, conduce to the more easy practice of those which God hath enjoined. Why, some of them, in some cases, may : and then they should, with prudence and moderation, be used and recommended. But prescribing by mere human authority a great number of such things, at all adventures, for almost all alike, or for any during their whole lives, is an evident mark, either of wrong judgement, or bad design. To the inconsiderate indeed they make a specious appearance. But if we reflect, how exorbitant a degree of ill-used power and wealth hath been artfully obtained by requiring them first, and occasionally dispensing with them afterwards ; how little good is done by them, that might not as well have been done without them ; and how very much evil naturally must, and in fact doth, arise from them ; needless difficulties and disquiet to the good, false hopes to sinners of compensating for the wickedness which they continue to indulge, spiritual pride in those who observe them rigidly, and uncharitable censures, nay often persecutions also, of such as do not ; we shall be fully convinced, that superadding thus imaginary duties to real ones is far from promoting the true interests of christian piety. And indeed all hardships under which men put themselves of their own accord, not being enjoined in scripture, nor evidently needful to preserve them from sin, and to raise their thoughts to a better world, (especially if they tend to promote rigour

and sourness rather than mildness and humility, hurt instead of benefiting them, and discredit religion with others : which in itself is a *reasonable service**, and directs us *not to refuse the good creatures of God*, but to *receive them with thanksgiving*†.

But some will ask, is not this explaining away to nothing what Christ hath most solemnly commanded as a very important duty ? How doth such doctrine leave any room for self-denial ? And wherein after all will it consist ? I answer, in what human nature usually finds much more reluctance to practise, than any of the severities mentioned yet. For there are none, that wicked men will not gladly undergo, rather than quit their favourite faults. Besides, the strict imposers of unnecessary restraints on their fellow-christians or themselves in some points, generally make amends in others by proportionable indulgences of unlawful gratifications. And so, between both, it seldom fails, but sin and superstition make a shift to go on, hand in hand, very comfortably. But the true self-denial allows of no such compromises. It is an absolute and universal surrender of every part of us to the disposal of our Maker : not only of the cravings of flesh and sense, but of self-opinion, self-will, self-interest : of love and hatred, hope and fear : nay, not of our appetites and affections only, but of *every imagination*‡, of our understandings also, short of that full conviction of truth, which the God of truth himself hath appointed for our guide. In a word, it is giving our whole selves away from ourselves, as it were, into his hands ; and determining, once for all, that not our own thoughts, inclinations, and desires, shall govern us, but the laws of God : not *our will*, but *his*, however contrary to it, shall *be done*§. These inward principles are, in a moral sense, the man : and it is, in full propriety of speech, denying and renouncing ourselves, when what we should conceive or wish or chuse is laid intirely out of the question, and the only thing regarded is, what heaven points out to us, to believe and do, whether by reason or by revelation. Mortification and self-denial have both of them been often almost wholly misapprehended ; and even, when somewhat better understood, have been much confounded one with the other. But though nearly akin, they are very distinguishable.

* Rom xii. 1.

† 2 Cor. x. 5.

‡ 1 Tim. iv. 4.

§ Luke xxii. 42.

tinguishable. The former is killing, destroying sin within ourselves: the latter, disowning and casting off whatever is dearest to us, in such degree as is necessary to destroy sin. And this being the nature of the duty, we need never fear, but occasions of practising it will be frequent and trying enough. The much greater need will be to fill our souls with a strong conviction of what I shall now endeavour to shew.

III, The indispensable obligation of it, and its unspeakable importance to our virtue and our happiness.

That being, *of whom and to whom are all things**, whose nature is absolutely simple and infinitely perfect, *cannot*, as the apostle expresses it†, *deny himself*. There is nothing within him, but rectitude and holiness; nothing without him, but what wholly depends on him: and therefore his sole rule of action must be his own good pleasure. But the most exalted of creatures, being his servants and his property, are essentially so far bound to self-denial, as not to do their own will, but the will of him who sent them into life. And in proportion as the frame of any moral agent is compounded of superior and inferior principles, the more he will be obliged to disregard and deny the lower, in order to follow the dictates of the higher. But wretched man, fallen and sinful, lies under a heavier necessity of this kind: for, made up of wrong propensities, in the degree that he is, in order to *deny ungodliness and worldly lusts*‡, he must *deny himself* continually. Christ indeed hath procured us by his blood the means of recovery from this lamentable condition: but still he only frees us from slavery, to subject us to a just and gracious government: *we are not our own, for we are bought with a price*§: and since by him we live, who *were dead in trespasses and sins*||, we are to *live henceforth, not unto ourselves, but unto him, which died for us, and rose again*¶. So that both as creatures, and as fallen and redeemed creatures, self-denial and self-surrender is our indispensable general duty. And we shall find it previously necessary to the right performance of every particular duty that lies before us.

Our appetites, passions, and fancies, are by nature many: and partly by the corruption of our nature, partly by volun-

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tary

* Rom. xi. 36.

† 2 Tim. ii. 13.

‡ Tit. ii. 12.

§ 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20.

|| Eph. ii. 1.

¶ 2 Cor. v. 15.

tary indulgence, they are headstrong and mischievous. What must be the consequence then, if we either study to humour them still farther, or let them take their own free course? Plainly, they will become quite ungovernable, and multiply sin and guilt upon us without end. The very thought of virtue and piety will so be excluded, as seldom to occur to us: and whenever conscience doth adventure to sound the unwelcome words in our ears, it will be silenced, overpowered, and banished from the place where it ought to dwell and preside. Sometimes it may carry a single point or two: but still, what upon the whole is uppermost in our hearts, will upon the whole govern our lives; and the occasional victories, obtained now and then, will be attended with continually greater difficulty and pain, and therefore will be attempted less and less frequently. Look around you: look within you: what is our general condition here on earth? Immoderate desire of wealth, or power, or fame, or pleasure, or ease, resentment, envy, vanity, some wrong inclination or other, it is well if not more than one springs up early: an ill-judging self-love cherishes it without examination: we take it hastily for granted, that here lie our happiness, and accordingly pursue it: many, without ever putting the question, whether virtue or religion forbid them or not. Others indeed do chance to reflect a little at times; some of them enough to form a sort of resolution, that they will quit such and such of their vices, perhaps all of them. But then, as they will, notwithstanding, preserve in general the same false tenderness for themselves that they ever had, and leave to mere inclination or caprice the same dominion over them; it is easy to foresee, that these resolutions must have a very ineffectual, a very short-lived influence, and every thing quickly relapse into its former state. So long then as we suffer it to be at all a determining reason for acting thus or thus, in cases of importance, that we have a mind to act so, there cannot be any hope of our behaving right with the least uniformity or constancy: and the only way is, to strike at the root of all our faults, wrong self-indulgence, instead of cutting off little branches and twigs, that will sprout afterwards faster than before.

Nor is this of more consequence to our virtue than to what is
closely

closely connected with it here, and inseparably hereafter, our happiness. Every principle in our nature was originally placed there for our good, but, when corrupted and improperly exerted, produces harm to us. And in particular, the dear affection that we bear to ourselves, if it seeks to attain its end by mistaken means, must fail of it, and make us miserable. The tender fondness that will suffer us to miss no pleasure, and bear no hardship, will as certainly destroy all firmness and health in the soul, as it doth in the body, and unfit us in both respects equally for what we must have to go through in life. Under this unhappy management, groundless aversions and pernicious desires grow continually more vehement; wild fancies multiply; each of them claims the absolute sway, and we are torn in pieces by their contentions. Or if they rule more amicably by turns, the various pursuits to which they successively prompt us, we often see at the time, are leading us to ruin: yet we know not how to be so cruel to ourselves, as to prefer the united interests of this world and the next to a present favourite inclination. So we grasp momentary pleasures, quickly followed by lasting uneasiness: are tormented by daily disappointments in what we obtain, as well as what we aim at without success: and very commonly, after innumerable follies and sufferings, the whole ends in despondency and sourness, dislike of ourselves and every one around us, dissatisfaction with the universal state of things, and the very Author of it: whilst, like ungoverned children, we know not what we would have, and nothing can please us. For the same gratification of every humour, that makes children both wicked and wretched, hath just the same effect on all those, who, by treating themselves in the like manner, contrive to be no wiser throughout the course of their lives than they were at the beginning. But, whether, we go on to be tossed through a restless variety of wrong pursuits, or fix on some one, that shall carry us forward more uniformly in error, it is in effect the same thing. By the one means or the other we are sure to be miserable, even in this world, and unspeakably more so in the next, if we permit our own wills and passions to be our guides.

Therefore our blessed Lord, *the way, the truth, and the life,*

*life**, who perfectly knew, both what our nature and condition require of us, and what our Maker designs us for, hath pointed out the only wise method; that we *deny ourselves, and follow him*: that, renouncing the indulgence of our own inclinations, we take his example and his laws for our only rule; and, without standing to compute what we may lose or suffer by it in this or that case, venture to give up body and soul in all cases to his government; and seeking happiness by no other means than obedience, trust God for the consequences. Were we but in such a state of mind, we should have one invariable rule to act by, "This is my duty, therefore nothing shall seduce me from it: this is contrary to my duty, therefore nothing shall engage me in it." We should have one general and full answer constantly ready for all temptations, instead of the manifold disadvantages and hazards of debating particulars with each of them singly. Their force must be unspeakably lessened, would we but follow this direction in earnest; never admit an insnaring second thought to creep in and puzzle a plain case, nor afford time to a vicious desire to argue the point with us, and paint itself out in plausible and inviting colours to deceive us; but, the moment we see it to be vicious, look on it in that sole view, reject it without delay for that sole reason, and think no more of it, else we shall be all inconsistency and irresolution, distracted between the *services of two masters*; sometimes preferring one, sometimes the other; then contriving a thousand silly schemes to reconcile both, and entangled by every endeavour in fresh perplexities. Whereas, would we thoroughly give up our whole selves into the hands of our rightful Sovereign, and fix the regard we owe him for the one principle of our conduct; the presence of that thought would awe into silence whatever was opposite to it; our bad inclinations would die away and be forgotten; good ones would spring up, and have nothing to oppose their growth; a better self, *a new man created after the image* God would be formed within us, instead of that which we had put *off*†; and our advances in goodness would be astonishing: like those of the pious Corinthians, whose charitable contributions, the apostle declares, were beyond his hopes: *but, saith he, they first gave their own selves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God*‡.

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* John xiv. 6.

† Col. iii. 10.

‡ 2 Cor. viii. 5.

This indeed is the only way to be religious: and religion is the only way to be happy. For, the true good of man, let us search for it ever so long, or fancy about it what we please, can never be found where it is not; and is only where our Maker hath placed it. All our capacities for it are of his bestowing: our whole being is at his disposal. If we withhold any thing from him, the holiness of his nature, the honour of his government, bind him to convince us of our guilt and folly. If, on the contrary, we resign all to him, he will *give us back richly to enjoy*, as the scripture expresses it*, all that is innocent and safe: he will reward us eternally hereafter for abstaining from what would hurt us even here: and it is inconceivably absurd to imagine we can provide for our own interests better, than by intrusting them with him. Nor perhaps in general do men imagine they can: but they see what is right, and dare not attempt it. A cowardly apprehension of pain in the effort keeps us in the far worse pain of a divided state of mind and life. We avoid some faults, and cannot prevail on ourselves to avoid others. We resolve against all sin, it may be: but cannot resolve against the things that we know will lead us into sin: so we leave stumbling-blocks in our own way, and undo every thing as fast as we do it. Then for a while self-reflection causes bitter remorse, but immediately self-indulgence brings forth new transgressions; and, in this wretched circle, we go round and round to our destruction: whereas one thorough determination, well kept, of yielding up all without reserve to God, would extricate us from this labyrinth, and settle us in a firm state of inward peace: the present advantages of the change would be great beyond belief; the future, infinite: and thus the self-denial our Saviour enjoins would appear to be the only true self-love.

But then we must not think, that forming such a resolution is all that we need in order to accomplish it. A vain opinion of our own strength is one part of the self that we are to deny: else we shall never have strength to any real good purpose. Our blessed Lord assures us, that *without him we can do nothing*†. St. Paul assures us, that *we are not sufficient to think any thing as of ourselves*‡. And repeated experience hath given us all, I fear,

too

* 1 Tim. vi. 17.

† John xv. 5.

‡ 2 Cor. iii. 5.

too many proofs of this truth. If then we are wicked, our only way is, that, yielding to the convictions of God's word and Spirit, we apply in the name of our blessed Redeemer for power to *deny ourselves and follow him*: that through him, as our high priest, we *present our souls and bodies a sacrifice to God**, beseeching him to accept the gift, to take and keep possession of us. And though we think ourselves ever so good, yet if we imagine we are become such, or hope to continue such, by our own abilities, we deceive ourselves, and *know nothing yet, as we ought to know†*. By the grace of God I am *what I am*, saith the apostle; *I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God, which was with me‡*. *I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me§*. Nay, lastly, if we flatter ourselves, that even by the means of help from above we have attained to a perfection of self-denial, or of any other virtue, we mistake our condition, endanger our humility, and neglecting to press forward, shall be driven back. Indeed, though perfection is ascribed to men in scripture, by way of opposition to characters wilfully and essentially defective||, and of comparison with others of inferior goodness¶, and in respect of God's gracious acceptance through Christ *Jesus***; yet, strictly speaking, the hope of ever attaining it here is vain, notwithstanding that the struggle to advance towards it ought to be incessant: for the nearer the approach, the greater the reward. But *who can say I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin? For there is not a just man upon earth, that doth good, and sinneth not*. When we put off these bodies, and not before, *that which is perfect being come, that which is in part shall be done away*. Our understandings shall be thoroughly enlightened, our affections completely purified, our wills intirely conformed to that of our heavenly Father; we shall love ourselves only as bearing his image, and *God shall be all in all*.

* Rom. xii. 1. † 1 Cor. viii. 2. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 10. § Gal. ii. 20.
 ¶ Job. viii. 20. ix. 22. ¶ Job. i. 1. ** Col. i. 28.

S E R M O N L X V I I I .

OUR SAVIOUR'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE DEAD AND LIVING.

R O M . x i v . 9 .

For to this end Christ both died and rose and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.

THE public offices of our church have led us, within a few months, through most of the principal transactions of our blessed Redeemer's life on earth. We have commemorated his condescension to take upon him *the likeness of sinful flesh* *, his submitting to *fulfil the righteousness* † of the Jewish law, and his early manifestation to the Gentile world ; his fasting forty days and nights, and yielding afterwards to be *tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin* ‡. Many of his wonderful works, many of his gracious instructions have been rehearsed in our ears ; and very lately his most bitter sufferings and death represented, as it were, before our eyes. We have accompanied him, from his sorrows and agonies in the garden, through all the sad variety of disgrace and pain that he underwent, till *he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost* § on the cross. We have seen his dead body pierced to the heart with a spear, taken down and interred, the sepulchre closed, sealed up, and guarded ; his disciples, though continuing to honour him, quite in despair about him : and yet we find him this day risen again, to die no more.

Surely it is time we should ask ourselves what was the meaning of so unparalleled a transaction, to which the attention of all mankind hath been called so solemnly ever since ? It could

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* Rom. viii. 3.

† Matth. iii. 15.

‡ Heb. iv. 15.

§ John xix. 30.

not be merely to move our compassion with a piteous history, that God sent his Son from heaven, to live in wretchedness and die in torment; nor to fill us with a vain admiration, that he raised him from the grave, and hath placed him at his own right hand. What then was the view and use of this most extraordinary dispensation? The text informs us. *To this end Christ both died and rose and revived*; or, as it should be translated, and is elsewhere in the New-Testament, *lives again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living*. Every thing he did or suffered was ordained to accomplish that merciful and awful scheme of providence, our Saviour's universal dominion over all; to make the obedient good and happy, and reward the disobedient according to their works. This important doctrine I shall

I. Explain and prove. Then shew,

II. Under what obligations it lays us.

I. Christ indeed, as the eternal Son of the Father, had original glory and dominion before the world existed; *was in the beginning with God, and was God* *. But the apostle speaks not here of that dignity and power which his divine nature always possessed, but which his human nature acquired, by dying and rising and living again. It is true, the former part of his life contributed greatly, both by his doctrine and example, to set up that kingdom of righteousness, over which he was to reign. And even then *the Father had given all things into his hand* †, and committed all judgment to him ‡. But this being done in consideration of his future sufferings, on them the foundation of his authority is laid in scripture. Thus St. Paul teaches, that, because *being in the form of God, he was willing to take upon him the form of a servant*, an inferior and ministering nature, as ours is; and then, being found in fashion as a man, humbled himself yet lower unto the death of the cross: *therefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name above every name* §. But elsewhere he more determinately grounds his sovereignty, on his passion alone; *We see Jesus, for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour* ¶. And justly doth it intitle him to an authority over us, since it gained him a property in us. For sin both subjecting men by
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* John i. 1.

† John iii. 35.

‡ John. v. 22.

§ Phil. ii. 6—9.

¶ Heb. ii. 9.

its guilt, as debtors and criminals, to the just sentence of God, and by its dominion, as captives and slaves, to the unjust empire of the devil; our Saviour, by delivering us in each of these respects, hath obtained a double right to us. By giving his life a ransom to divine justice, he hath bought us to himself with the price of his blood; so that we are his in right of purchase. And having destroyed the tyranny of the wicked one over us, by the holiness of the precepts which his death confirmed, and the efficacy of the grace which it procured, we are his again in right of conquest.

This authority, thus acquired, his resurrection openly proclaimed; attesting, not only in general the truth of his mission, but in particular the acceptance of his sufferings for our redemption: and consequently his title to govern us, and his power to raise us up again according to his promise, as he had raised himself. Hence, during the remainder of his continuance on earth, he founded and gave laws to his church; and being yet more solemnly invested with fulness of power on his ascension to heaven, he ever lives to rule and protect it. Nor doth his sovereignty extend over mankind alone, but the whole creation. For God, as St. Paul assures us, *having raised him from the dead, hath set him at his own right hand, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and hath put all things under his feet**: that in the name of Jesus, as he adds in another place, *every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord†*. In these words he is described both as high-priest and the king of the universe. His possession of the former office is expressed by saying, that *every knee shall bow in his name*; for so it should be translated, not *at his name*, when his name is mentioned: though that be a practice, both unexceptionable and reverent. To bow the knee is to pray. So, *Eph. iii. 14. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he would grant you to be strengthened by his Spirit in the inner man*. Therefore to bow the knee in the name of Jesus, is to pray in his name, as the person qualified and appointed to present our petitions to God, and derive his blessings.

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* Eph. i. 20, 21, 22.

† Phil. ii. 10, 11.

sings upon us. The remaining part of the passage declares his kingly office: *And every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord*; or, as St. John more emphatically styles him, *Lord of Lords, and King of Kings* *. Nor are men only, but *all the angels* of God, required to *worship him* † as such. Created beings, of how exalted rank soever, can only be *faithful as servants in the house of God, but Christ as a son over his house, which himself hath builded* ‡.

In what manner he governs the rest of his works we are not concerned to enquire. Men he governs, by giving laws, which every one, who receives the knowledge of them, is bound to obey, and no one may add too, diminish, or alter; by forming those who submit to him willingly, into a regular society, or universal church, provided with fit means of instruction, discipline, and grace; by improving them in all goodness, and strengthening them against all temptation; by providing, that in the worst of times *the gates of hell shall not prevail* § to abolish true religion: and gradually bringing on, according to his promise, that happy age, when *the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall take to himself his great power, and shall reign* ¶. But however illustrious his dominion may then appear, the full manifestation of it, (for which every other act of his regal authority is opening the way) will be in that hour, when he shall *come with the holy angels to sit upon the throne of his glory, and all nations being gathered before him* ||, shall sentence the wicked, both men and devils, to everlasting punishment, but bestow on the righteous life eternal. After which, the ends of this whole dispensation being now accomplished, he *shall deliver up his kingdom of grace to God even the Father* **, in whose kingdom of glory he *shall still reign*, with him and the Holy Spirit, over his saints and angels, *for ever and ever* ††.

Such is the sovereignty over all, which the Son of man first died to acquire; and then rising again, lives to exercise. And as it extends through the whole creation of God, from the beginning to the consummation of all things, no wonder, if the reasons

* Rev. xvii. 14. † Heb. i. 6. ‡ Heb. iii. 3, 5, 6. § Matth. xvi. 18.

¶ Rev. xi. 15, 17. || Matth. xvi. 27.—xix. 28.—xxv. 31, 32.

** 1 Cor. xv. 24.

†† Rev. xi. 15.

reasons and circumstances of many particulars in it be incomprehensible to us. Notwithstanding these, as the main of it appears highly worthy of God, and no part evidently unworthy, we ought to believe the whole, on the strongest and manifold attestations which he hath given us of its truth. The *preaching of Christ crucified* may seem *foolishness* * to the wise in their own imaginations. But whoever is duly sensible of his being in a state, where we *know but in part, and see* what is nearest to us *through a glass darkly* †, will be glad to receive, with implicit faith, that *wisdom of God in a mystery, which he hath ordained before the world unto our glory* ‡.

The foundation of the christian scheme, that we are all originally prone to sin, and actually guilty of it, is but too notorious. Now the mercy of our heavenly Father, though constantly shewn in a proper degree to every proper object, preserves not the faulty from daily experiencing dreadful consequences of their faults in this life, which the sincerest repentance will not singly prevent. And who can disprove, what the New Testament affirms, and throughout implies, that we should all have experienced yet worse consequences in the life to come, had not our blessed Redeemer done and suffered for us the things he hath? In general, that one person may, by interposing, and even bearing much, on behalf of others, avert from them great evils, and procure them great good, we are very sensible. And supposing us ever so ignorant, what connexion in particular there is between the sufferings of Christ and our own salvation; we have no more cause to complain, than that we cannot learn, by what steps a friend hath delivered us from worldly danger, or by what efficacy a medicine hath restored our health. All that we are concerned in, all that we are to believe and do, we are plainly told. And if we are not told, what God alone is concerned in, the reasons of his own counsels; we may well be content, that by this method we are brought to eternal felicity, without asking, why rather by this, than any other.

Yet even to that inquiry some answer may be returned. The poverty and labour, the injuries and provocations, the sorrows and pains, which our Saviour went through, with so perfect and constant a greatness and goodness of mind, afford the
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* 1 Cor. i. 23.

† 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

‡ 1 Cor. ii. 7.

strongest confirmations of our faith in his doctrine, and most powerful incitements to practise the very hardest of his precepts. That we are not forgiven but on the condition of his undergoing these things, proves, that God hath an irreconcilable abhorrence of sin, and a high regard to the honour of his government: while yet his providing for the performance of this condition proves equally, that he hath the tenderest compassion for his fallen and helpless creatures.

Other footsteps of wisdom in this wonderful transaction, an humble search may undoubtedly trace. But whether many more, and yet weightier motives to it, may not still remain behind, which perhaps it is impossible, perhaps unfit, for us to see at present, we cannot know, for we are not told. Who would venture to say of the most familiar object of sense before him, that its only uses are those which he is able to discover? And surely we ought not to have less modesty in points, that are so much farther beyond our reach. We believe, on the credit of men like ourselves, many things to have influences, that we neither have experienced them to have, nor discern by reason that they must have. Why then is not God to be trusted, as well as our fellow-creatures? And since, in the affairs of this world, we often walk *not by sight but by faith* *; what objection can there be against it in those of another? Especially considering, that we are only a small portion of the whole, the rest of which is almost intirely hid from us: and cannot even conjecture, what dependences there may be of one part on the other; and much less, what those dependences may require.

It plainly appears, that men are by no means the only beings interested in our blessed Lord. The scripture teaches, that, as *by him and for him were created all things that are in heaven and are in earth, visible and invisible, and by him all things consist: so by him also was God pleased, having made peace through the blood of his cross, to reconcile all things to himself, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven†: that in the dispensation of the fulness of time, he might gather together in one all things in Christ; both which are in heaven and which are on earth, even in him‡*. Such hints, as these, of a scheme of providence amazingly extensive, were not given, either to gratify or excite
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* 2 Cor. v. 7.

† Col. i. 16—20.

‡ Eph. i. 10.

our curiosity ; but to admonish us, that, in the religious administration of the universe, there are particulars, not designed to be comprehended by us at present, but by some other part of the creation ; things done *to the intent*, (as the apostle elsewhere more explicitly informs us) *that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be made known, by the church, the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose, which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord* *. Well then may it become us to be modest in judging of a plan so much too great for us ; and to reverence, without expecting to search out fully, that *mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ, wherein, we are expressly told, are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* †. I proceed therefore now,

II. To shew under what obligations this dominion of our Saviour lays us. And these are, first to acknowledge, secondly to obey it.

If the original relation we bear to our Creator is to be owned and respected ; the next we stand in, to our Redeemer, is as justly entitled to our regard. That one is taught by nature, the other by revelation only, makes no difference. Being equally real, they are equally grounds of duty : and neglect of either is alike profane. God, the great ruler of the world, may both administer the whole of it in such a form as he thinks fit ; and vary the regulations of each part, as varying circumstances require. There can possibly be no more room to doubt, whether under the general laws of his moral kingdom he may form, from time to time, particular institutions of religion ; than whether, under the general laws of human society, may be formed particular institutions of government. Suppose then a person were to advance, concerning the latter, what some bold writers have done concerning the former ; were to profess an intire submission to the mutual obligations of rational beings at large, but an utter contempt of the peculiar statutes of the community, in which he lived : should declare, that the commands of the civil power were only a republication

* Eph. iii. 10, 11. "We know not what need there was to set up a head and chieftain, in opposition to the *prince of this world the prince of the power of the air*, &c. whereof there are more than obscure intimations in scripture." Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity, p. 530. Vol. I. of his works.

† Col. ii. 2, 3.

tion of the law of nature; that this being absolutely perfect, nothing could be added to it, nothing prescribed, which was not obligatory before such prescription; and that therefore all injunctions and determinations, by national authority, of what common reason had not enjoined and determined, were arbitrary, tyrannical and unjust; that public wisdom, being always the same, must always direct the same things; and therefore different orders could never have force in different ages or provinces: would not these notions be extremely absurd? And surely they are no less absurd in religion, than social life. If men may form themselves with good cause into particular civil establishments, God may form them with better cause into particular religious establishments, such as that of Christianity. If our earthly superiors may discern sufficient ground as the condition and behaviour of their subjects alter, to put all, or any part of them, under new regulations, or grant them new privileges: much more may *our Father, which is in heaven* *, do so with us. If we are bound often to obey the appointments of human prudence without knowing the motives of those appointments: well may omniscience claim the most unlimited compliance. And if, lastly, a dutiful attachment to the constitution of our country be a part of a worthy character; and wilful violation of it, disloyalty to the state: surely the heartiest zeal for the ordinances of our better country is a still more essential part; and deliberate contempt of them, rebellion against God: a dreadful crime always, but singularly heinous and fatal in the present case; because these ordinances are calculated throughout solely for our good, temporal and spiritual, present and future: and nothing else can secure us the same advantages. The gospel, besides comprehending, and expressing more clearly, the whole of natural religion, superadds also, such assurance of pardon, such means of grace, and such glorious promises of eternal bliss to body and soul; that little do they consider their own interest, who would rest their case, if they could, on the mere conjectures of unassisted reason; which, though sufficient to render the condition of those tolerable, who have no other guide; yet must be owned, in comparison, to leave sinners much room for fear, and afford but small foundation

* Matth. vii. 11.

tion for lasting hope. Indeed, with these new advantages, christianity brings in some new precepts also; but none of them burthenfome; and all of them conducive to our happiness, here and hereafter; provided we not only acknowledge the dominion we are under, but, which is the second and last point, obey it.

There are few who totally reject religion: but few also, who receive it thoroughly and effectually. Some trusting to the notional belief and formal practice of merely revealed truths and duties, allow themselves to despise, and occasionally to neglect moral obligations. This was the great error of the Jews in our Saviour's days: as in truth it hath been of christians in general ever since: and there cannot be a more pernicious one. But of late, especially in this nation, great numbers have fallen into the opposite error. Professing the highest value for morals, they have little or none for piety. Even that which nature dictates, they hardly shew any real concern for: and as absolute a contempt of the doctrines and appointments of scripture, though it may be all the while they think they believe in scripture, as they could do, if they denied it. Now very seldom will either the practice, or even the notions of morality, in such persons, be near so perfect as they should be. For disregard to God or to any of his commands, will soon bring on a farther disregard, both of right behaviour towards our fellow-creatures, and right government of ourselves: till, acknowledging virtue to be his law, we shall acknowledge nothing as virtue but what we like; leave out all uneasy restraints, put in all agreeable indulgences; and so have an excellent rule of life in pretence, perhaps in imagination, but in reality none at all. Or, supposing this to be otherwise: yet the duties we owe, to him who hath made us by the word of his power, to him who hath redeemed us from guilt and misery by his blood, to him who is ready to purify us by his perpetual influences, must be the principal ties we are under: and did the conscientious observance of them contribute ever so little, (though indeed it contributes more than any thing) to the good order of this world; still it is indispensably necessary to a purpose of far greater moment, preparing our hearts for the enjoyment and happiness of the world to come. We strangely mistake our case, if we measure every thing, as we are too apt to do, merely by its influence on the present

life. This whole scene of things is a state of education and discipline only ; we are forming and training up, by the laws of our Saviour's kingdom here, to such a temper and spirit, as may render us ever blessed in it hereafter. No wonder, if now, in our condition of infancy, we see not the reason and use of every step taken with us. Being sure we are in kind and good hands, our duty and our wisdom is to give up ourselves intirely to God's disposal. For we know not what we do, when we presume to slight any part of what he hath prescribed : only this we know, that *offending in one point*, is both in reasonable construction and in probable consequence, being *guilty of all* *.

Religion, though ever in substance the same, hath been proposed to mankind in different shapes, as the reason of things in different ages required. Under whichsoever of these dispensations we had lived, our business had been, humbly to conform ourselves to it, and carefully to improve ourselves by it, *walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless* †. But as we are happily reserved to the fullest and clearest, the most rational and amiable exhibition of faith and duty that the world ever saw or will see ; we are surely bound to embrace it with peculiar joy ; to obey from the heart every injunction of so gracious a master, as our blessed Redeemer ; and, which is the end of all, make such a progress in real inward devotion, benevolence, purity and humility, as will bear a due proportion to the advantages, that we enjoy. For it cannot be, that after those demonstrations of love, and those means of improvement, which God hath given us in his gospel, he should only expect us to be as good as heathens : and yet are we not often worse ? But in vain do we call ourselves Christians, if names and forms be the whole of our christianity : In vain do we call the holy Jesus Lord, unless, by doing such things as he commands, we become such as he was. To this therefore, if we have any sense of gratitude, the love of our Saviour must constrain us : to this, if we have any concern for happiness, the fear of our judge must compel us. For, as the apostle, just before the text, hath most truly observed, *none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself : for whether*

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* James ii. 10.

† Luke i. 6.

we live, we live unto the Lord ; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord *. In both states we are absolutely his property, and intirely at his disposal. If we obey him, *we shall also reign with him ; if we deny him, he will also deny us* †. Let us therefore always bear in mind his own awful words : *I am he, that liveth, and was dead ; and behold I am alive for evermore, amen : and have the keys of death and of hell* ‡.

* Rom. xiv. 7, 8.

† 2 Tim. ii. 12.

‡ Rev. i. 18.

SERMON LXIX.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST.

ACTS X. 40, 41.

Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly. Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead.

THE resurrection of our blessed Lord being the principal fact, on which he himself put the proof of his divine authority; and being that fact in particular, of which he especially appointed his apostles to be witnesses to mankind; it concerns the christian cause very nearly, that the evidence of this point should be undeniable. And accordingly it is obviously plain, that no impostor would ever have appealed to a method of trying his pretensions, that required his being put to death before it could decide any thing: and that no enthusiast would ever have conducted himself in so calm and prudent a manner, and taught so rational a doctrine, as our Saviour did. It is equally plain, that his followers could never be deceived, and imagine their Master alive again when he was not. They could not be deceived by their hopes and expectations: for they own, they dispaired of it. They could not be deceived for want of opportunities to find out the truth: for they declare, that he appeared a great number of times, to several of them singly, to all of them assembled, once to the number of five hundred, by day as well as by night, in very different and distant places, sometimes unexpectedly, sometimes by appointment: that they not only saw, but touched and handled him; that he walked and conversed and eat and drank with them; that he gave them these evidences for no less than forty days together; and then was visibly taken up into the clouds before

before their eyes. If now it be possible for so many persons to be mistaken in all this, it is impossible for any one to be rationally sure of any thing.

It may also be shewn further, that as they were not deceived themselves, so neither did they intend to deceive others in this matter. There is no manner of reason to suspect, that they would have done it, if they could. For supposing them to think he came from God; they might well conclude that God would take care of his own cause, and did not need their turning cheats to serve it. And supposing they now at last thought him a seducer; what could there be, either honest, or wiser, or more likely, for them to do, than to confess their mistake; with due indignation at his having imposed on them so long, and drawn them into such great inconveniences and dangers? But even if they had been desirous to have set up an imposture: they had evidently neither skill to contrive, nor courage to attempt, nor power to execute it. They were comparatively but a handful of men in all: and they had very lately had full experience, that they could neither trust one another, nor themselves: for one of them had betrayed his Master; the most zealous man amongst them, had denied him, and all the rest had forsaken him. The whole weight of authority, *Jewish* and *Roman*, was against them, careful to watch them, and (as they saw by the example before their eyes) determined not to spare them, if they went on. Then as for the people; they had never opposed the magistrates in any part of this affair; they had furiously joined with them in the last part; and there was not the least likelihood now, of their undertaking the defence of a few unknown and mean men, who taught a system of doctrine very unwelcome to their zealous spirits; and built it on a strange fact, utterly contradictory to their settled opinions. For as they had no notion, that the *Messiah* was to be put to death: they could have none of his rising again. Surely, in these circumstances, if his disciples had acted on worldly motives, their point must have been to provide for their own safety by flight and silence: and thus, for aught that appears, they might have been very safe. But if they resolved to pretend a resurrection; their very first step must be to get the body into their power, that it might not be produced against them: and in this, guarded as it was, they must either
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have perished, or at least have failed. Or had they succeeded; it must have been notorious, by what means they had succeeded; and the chief priests would have been able to give the world some better account of the matter, than that absurd one of the soldiers, affirming, (what they could not know; and durst not have owned, if it had been true) that, whilst they slept, his followers came and stole him away. Or could they possibly have gone thus far undiscovered: still, what prospect had they before them, by carrying on the same scheme, which their Lord had done, but to be persecuted and put to death as he had been? They were persecuted accordingly: some of them put to death soon; the rest, after they had been harrassed many years: yet all persisted in their testimony to the end of their lives. Now men will too commonly renounce what they know to be true, rather than suffer for it: but by no means chuse to suffer, in this manner, for what they know to be false. Or however unaccountably obstinate one or two may, by great chance, happen to be, numbers will not be so; especially at times, and places, remote from each other. And it must be further observed, that not only these persons continued uniform and unmoveable in their testimony, but they none of them ever disgraced it, by any sort of vicious or interested behaviour. And, though nothing, but love of truth, could induce men to join with them; and there was every possible motive besides, against it: yet multitudes of all ranks in all nations did join with them, did suffer with them; did attest their performing the same miracles with their master, and enabling others to perform them: and thus they went on, till, with no other weapons, they and their successors conquered the world.

All these things have been frequently and fully proved; few of them denied, no solid reason alledged for denying any of them: only small cavils and difficulties have been raised, here and there: amongst which, one that appears perhaps the most considerable, is grounded on what *St. Peter* mentions in the text, of his own accord, that our Saviour after his resurrection appeared, *not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before of God*. Upon this it hath been argued, that selecting only a few persons, and all those out of his own party, to be his witnesses, instead of permitting every one to see him that would, was a very suspicious method: that he ought to have shewn
himself

himself to all the people, for they were all concerned in the matter; at least to all the rulers: for, if he had convinced them; the testimony of persons, who had been so much his enemies, and were of such weight and credit, would have satisfied the whole nation, and of consequence the whole world. This objection, which may possibly sometimes perplex believers, as well as afford a handle for profane talk to unbelievers, I shall make it my present business to answer.

And, in the first place, it misrepresents the fact. There is neither the least proof, nor the least probability, that any one, who desired to see our Saviour after his resurrection, was refused it. The apostles were chosen, not to be the only persons, that should see him; far from it: but to be the chief persons, that should go through the world, to testify they had seen him; and to instruct and superintend those, who should believe on him. They were of his party indeed. But what could make them so? Nothing, but his doctrine and miracles first: and his resurrection afterwards. For, though even whilst he lay dead, they honoured him; yet their faith in him, as the *Messiah*, was almost dead too, till they saw him alive again. If ever so many more had seen him, and been convinced by it; must not they have become of his party also? and would that have destroyed their evidence? If it would, he could not possibly have any evidence, though he had appeared and convinced the rulers and the whole city. And if it would not, why were not the apostles, and other first christians, good evidence? For aught we know, many of the five hundred, to whom he appeared at once, might be convinced by that appearance, and not before. But however that be, if an attestation of five hundred persons, or a much less number to any fact, be not enough, no number can be. For if so many can, every one of them, either be deceived, or combine to deceive others; ever so many more may also: and then there is an end of human testimony. Therefore, in all cases, a competent quantity of witnesses to any action, or writing, is deemed sufficient; and procuring as many, as could possibly be got, is never required. This indeed was a case of a very extraordinary nature. And I hope you have seen, there was proof of it to a very extraordinary degree: such proof, that, had this one circumstance, of our Saviour's not appearing to all the people, been ever so unaccountable; nay, had there been many other strange ones
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besides; the direct positive evidence would have greatly outweighed whatever suspicions could be raised from them, with any pretence of reason: and to more than suspicions they could not amount.

God indeed could have given, no doubt, yet stronger proof than we have. But is he obliged to give on all occasions, or any, the strongest he can? Doth he give us such, in the most important affairs of common life? Doth he give us such, of his own existence? And are we, for want of it, neither to believe any thing, nor act any way, in respect of this world or another? Can God be bound to gratify the fancifulness, the indolence, the obstinacy of his creatures, so as to afford them still more and more evidence, the more inconsiderate and perverse they are? Or are not we bound, humbly to seek, thankfully to receive, and carefully to use, what he doth afford us? We may think indeed, that it had been greater goodness to afford us further proofs yet: and so we may think it would, for God to have done a multitude of other things, which yet he hath not done: for instance, to have made us happy, without putting us to any trial of our behaviour: yet this world is plainly a state of trial, in which our present and future good, or evil, depends on our conduct. And why may not our fairness in receiving evidence be one thing tried, as well as our obedience, in acting suitably to it, another? Now the highest possible degree of evidence leaves no room almost for this trial. And therefore what our Saviour said to St. *Thomas*, was perfectly just: *Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they, that have not seen, and yet have believed**. That situation gives an opportunity for honest and candid minds, to shew themselves such, and be rewarded for it. And if it doth lead captious and unfair ones to shew themselves too, and be punished; how have they deserved better?

But particularly, how had the Jews deserved more, or so much, proof, of our Saviour's mission, as he had, before his resurrection, vouchsafed them? They had seen innumerable miracles of various kinds, performed by him: they had seen several miracles of this very kind. Still, they had not only refused to acknowledge him, but deliberately rejected, condemned, and put him to death. Where then was their claim
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* John xx. 29.

to further favours? If he had forbidden his apostles to mention his resurrection to them; and directed them to preach the gospel only to the Gentiles; had it been unjust? But instead of this, he gave them, notwithstanding, the first knowledge of it, with the same evidence for it, that he gave the rest of mankind. And he had plainly foretold, that he would give them no more: that his disciples should see him after his death, and they should not*. For indeed his commission, so far as it related peculiarly to instructing them, was now at an end. The believing *Jews* were to make part of his church, in common with the *Gentiles*. The unbelieving ones he had no further especial concern with, than to inflict on them, unless they repented, that punishment, which God had decreed. And on what foundation, after this, could they be intitled to his appearing amongst them? Every nation, every person upon earth, ever since, hath had, and still hath, full as good a title, and a better, to expect his appearing to them also. For if it were necessary, in order to give the *Jews* sufficient evidence: it is necessary, in order to give it us. And if they might reasonably hope for it as matter of favour, why not we likewise, who live so long after, and, I hope, have not deserved quite so ill?

This objection therefore proves a great deal too much, and for that reason proves nothing; even supposing, that our Saviour's public appearance, after his death, would have had such happy effects, as some have pretended. But indeed the consequences of this, which God alone can know perfectly, (and therefore it might become us to acquiesce in his judgment) have certainly been considered very imperfectly by these objectors. For if our blessed Lord had appeared, either to all the people, or to all the rulers of the people, what is it likely would have followed?

If to all the people: many of them, to be sure, had never seen him before his resurrection: and therefore could have no conviction of it from seeing him after. Many had seen him but transiently in a crowd: some only when he was disfigured with ill-usage, and stooping under his cross: probably not a few had mistaken for him the person, that carried it part of the way in his stead. Even when he was fixed upon it, and

VOL. II.

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* Matth. xxiii. 39. John xiv. 19.

lifted up; distance would hinder some, and the change of features, by agonies and death, would hinder others, from knowing him again with any certainty. Just as in the case of the blind man; one part would have said, *it is he*; another, *he is like him**: but a third perhaps quite the contrary. Every one would have spoken, as their fancy or prejudices led them; his enemies would have magnified and triumphed in the difference of persuasions: and no certain judgment could ever have been formed, unless the many, who knew but little of him, had submitted their opinions to the few, in comparison, that knew him well: which possibly they would not. But if they had, this would have amounted to very little more, than believing the testimony of others, without seeing him themselves at all. And whether the number, then present at *Jerusalem*, of such as were personally acquainted with him, might be greater, or less, than the five hundred, whom he appeared to at once, we cannot know. But were it much greater; still suppose only, what is very supposable, that some of these had been induced, either then or afterwards, by promises, or threatenings, or punishments, to deny it was he; what perplexities must that have raised? And how much wiser was the method, which God took, of shewing him to such alone, as knew him thoroughly, and he foresaw would testify their knowledge with uprightness and constancy?

If then, to avoid this endless contradiction, he had appeared to the chief priests and elders only: still, several of them, in all likelihood, either knew him not, or but imperfectly. And had they all known him ever so well: it is far from certain, that, on seeing him, they would have believed in him, after what they had seen, without believing in him. Amongst other things, they several of them saw *Lazarus* rise, and more had opportunities of conversing with him after he was risen. Yet they did not believe in *Jesus* for that. They might have ascribed this miracle, as well as others, to *Beelzebub*: or, as their successors, down to this day, absurdly ascribe all of them to pretended magic arts. They must indeed have been convinced, that, by some means or other, he was risen: but that would have made them no witnesses for him. It appears by
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* John ix. 9.

their whole conduct, that they were convinced of it, without seeing him. Not only their bribing the soldiers; but their leaving his disciples unmolested at first; their bearing so quietly all their boldness of speech for some time afterwards; their suffering *Gamaliel* to express his doubts, whether this matter were not of God; their following in part his advice, to let them alone, which was founded on those doubts; instead of prosecuting them to the utmost, as impostors: in short, their whole history, in the beginning of the *Acts*; and particularly several things in it, which St. *Luke* doth not seem once to have thought of applying to this purpose, evidently shew, that the Jewish rulers well knew, a strict inquiry would not serve their turn; and therefore tried, as long as they could, to stifle and conceal what had happened, in hopes it would gradually be forgotten. Undoubtedly their wiser way had been, to have owned the truth, and yielded to it. But they were too wicked to be wise: and so contrived only to be cunning. Our Saviour had declared in strong terms against them: they had proceeded to the last extremities against him. Therefore, besides their speculative prejudices; if he prevailed, all their authority, they saw, was utterly gone; and their persons, they probably imagined, were not safe. So that, hardened as they were, and persuaded it was too late to retreat; laying new evidence before them would only have increased their guilt in resisting it: they would have believed nothing they could help; they would have acknowledged nothing at all; but, if need had required, averred the direct contrary to what their own eyes had beheld. Probably indeed they were not all profligate alike: some of them would have submitted to our Saviour, if they had seen him: but how do we know, that the same persons did not, upon the testimony of others seeing him? For they, whom any proof would convince, might very well be convinced by such proof, as that was: and we are expressly told, that a *great company of the priests were obedient to the faith**: whose conviction, and that of thousands more, at *Jerusalem* itself, so very soon after, against their former deep-rooted persuasion, and present interest, is a strong confirmation of the fact asserted by those, who were witnesses: and, on the whole, may be full as satisfactory, as if they had been witnesses themselves.

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* *Acts* vi. 7.

But supposing that our Saviour's appearance to them would have converted all the rulers: undoubtedly this would have had a great, perhaps a general effect, in that one nation. But every nation, and every succeeding age, was concerned equally in this matter: and what effect would it have had upon them? The *Romans* first, would have considered it as a *Jewish* fraud, concerted amongst themselves, to raise the credit of their own religion; and no more have regarded the miracles of the apostles amongst their countrymen, in these circumstances, than we do those of the church of *Rome*, pretended to be wrought, where every one is either unwilling, or afraid, to detect them. The infidels of later days, who believe nothing of the other miracles which the Jews believe, would they have believed this, merely because the Jews believed it? Since they cannot even now refrain from ascribing our religion to policy and priest-craft, though all the Jewish politicians and priests were zealous against it to the utmost; what would they have said, if both had been for it, on seeing Christ after his resurrection? Undoubtedly, that they had feigned a difficulty of being brought over into what they had, in truth, originally contrived; and, by their art and authority, prevented the discoveries, that else might have been made; or hushed up those, that actually were made.

Nor would even this have been the worst consequence yet. Had both the rulers, and the people received him as the Messiah, on the evidence of his appearing a second time alive: still they would have received him, according to their own false notion of the Messiah, as a temporal prince; and been immediately up in arms to set him on the throne, whether he would or not. For when he had performed but one miracle that took with them: he found they were resolved instantly to *make him king by force**; and he avoided it only by escaping from them. He might indeed, when he was risen again, have plainly told them all their mistake: but they would either have rejected him once more upon it, (and then, to what purpose had they seen him?) or they would have thought he meant something different from what he seemed to say; as the disciples did, when he very plainly foretold his own death. Even them he could never set thoroughly right in the article of his kingdom, so long

* John vi. 15.

long as he remained on earth: much less the people. They were uneasy under their new masters: they expected a deliverer: their expectations were just then at the height: and had he shewn himself amongst them, and been acknowledged by them; what could have restrained them, but such a power, as God never exercises over the wills of men; for it would destroy their freedom, and alter the whole constitution of the moral world? Therefore, instead of *appearing to all the people*, he did not let his disciples preach him to any of the people, from his resurrection till after his ascension: for had the body of them been told, and believed, that the Messiah was risen, and still amongst them; of course they would have been eager in seeking him; and what rumours and tumults would this have raised, and what must have been the consequences? After this, if he had left them, and ascended into heaven, the remedy had come too late: the ferment would have continued; and it is impossible to know, to what height it might have risen.

But had the Jews been ever so quiet; ever so much convinced by our Saviour, that they ought to remain quiet: yet, when once the *Romans*, who must know their former notions of the *Messiah*, came to understand, that they all agreed that he was at last come; they would never have believed this calm to be any thing, but an artifice, to lull them asleep, till matters were ripe for a general insurrection. They would therefore have seized on the leading men immediately, called in their forces from the countries round, and required the whole nation to renounce their new king. Had they submitted to this, there had been an end of christianity amongst them. Had they resisted, as in all probability they would: upon the *Romans* prevailing, what the chief priests apprehended had certainly come to pass; they would have *taken away their place and nation**, and the whole would have been charged on the doctrine of Christ. If the Jews had prevailed; they would have imagined their success a full proof, that the Messiah was yet virtually, though not corporally, amongst them; and proceeded to extend his dominion as wide as they could: under which circumstances, the gospel, in a manner absolutely contrary to its nature and genius, must have owed its progress, if it made any, to force, not persuasion; and so have been liable to the
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* John xi. 48.

same unanswerable objection, that the religion of *Mahomet* is now.

Or lastly, supposing what is in the highest degree unlikely, that neither the Jews had rebelled, nor the *Romans* suspected them, but both had been made such as they ought, by a public appearance of our Saviour after his resurrection: undoubtedly this had been very happy for that age, and perhaps the next too: but what had been the case of distant ages? We, that live in the latter days should, by these means, have lost intirely all that strong and necessary evidence, for the truth of his miracles and history, which arises now from the impossibility of his primitive disciples having any motive to deceive men, in teaching a doctrine, for which they suffered, so patiently and cheerfully, persecution and death. Christianity would then, in all likelihood, have been considered as a superstructure of *Roman* policy, erected, by an artful emperor, on a piece of Jewish enthusiasm, which he found very commodious for bringing the world into good order; particularly into quiet subjection to its new master. And the meekness of spirit, which our religion enjoins, and the great stress it lays on obedience to the civil magistrate, would have been thought a demonstration, that this, and nothing else, was the real truth. So that the whole would have seemed by this method a contrivance of man: whereas now it appears plainly the work of God; affording reasonable evidence to good minds; preventing the harm, that must have followed, if bad ones, continuing such, had joined with them; and turning that opposition, both of Jews and heathens, which threatened the ruin of the gospel, into a proof of its truth, that will support it for ever.

These considerations are surely sufficient to remove any doubts of serious and humble minds on this head: to convince objectors, that they do not always see to the bottom of what they venture to talk about very freely: and to make it probable, that, in other points, as well as the present, when they come to be thoroughly examined, *the foolishness of God* will always be found *wiser than men**: which good purposes may surely justify dwelling, now and then, somewhat largely on a subject of less general and practical use. It is true, the bad consequences, that might have attended our Saviour's public appearance

* 1 Cor. i. 25.

pearance after his death, are several of them only conjectural: but the good ones, imagined likely to flow from it, are so too: and stronger conjectures are very justly opposed to weaker. Nay were any, or ever so many, of the reasons, alledged for his conduct in this respect, of no weight at all: yet who knows, what others there may still remain in the endless treasures of the divine wisdom, to be discovered hereafter? And what hath so fallible and short-sighted a creature, as man, to do; but thankfully to receive whatever knowledge, be it more or less perfect, his Maker shall vouchsafe to give him; and apply himself with the utmost care, to act suitably to what he understands; instead of raising objections and cavils, out of every particular, that he is ignorant of? *For the secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things, which are revealed, belong unto us, and to our children for ever; that we may do all the words of this law*.*

Let us all therefore learn, not only to believe firmly in speculation, that our Saviour is risen again, but in the faith of his resurrection to prepare for our own: earnestly praying God, *to raise us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness; and diligently seeking those things, which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God; that, when he shall appear, we also may appear with him in glory†.* After his crucifixion he appeared on earth only to a few: but the day is approaching, when, *behold, he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth, that rejected or disobeyed him, shall wail because of him‡: and shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power, when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believed the testimony of him in that day§.* For the Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the arch-angel and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; and they which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we be ever with the Lord||.

* Deut. xix. 29.

§ 2 Thess. i. 9, 12.

† Col. iii. 1. 4.

|| 1 Thess. iv. 15, 16, 17.

‡ Rev. i. 7.

S E R M O N LXX.

MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL, THE AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST.

2 C O R. V. 20.

Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us ; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

THE ministers of the gospel ought ever to have in their minds the end of their office, that they may diligently use the right means to attain it : and the people under our care should be no less attentive to it, in order to receive, by co-operating faithfully with us, the benefits intended to be conveyed to them through our hands. Now the nature of our commission is set forth in the text : where you have

I. The character, in which we act, *ambassadors for Christ.*

II. The errand, on which we are sent, to *pray men* that they would *be reconciled to God.*

I. Our character is that of *ambassadors for Christ*, which means *instead of Christ*, as the same word is translated in the latter part of the verse. God sent his Son into the world, as the messenger of his covenant ; the person, by whom he notified his gracious promises, and the conditions of them, to mankind. When he ceased to instruct them personally, his words to his apostles were, *as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you* *. Nor did he send the twelve only, but gave to his church other pastors and teachers also, *for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of his body, till we all come unto perfect men in Christ* †, and promised to be *with them alway, even unto the end of the world* ‡. Such therefore the apostles appointed in every city ;
deputed

* John xx. 21.

† Eph. iv. 12, 13.

‡ Matth. xxviii. 20.

deputed them to *work the work of the Lord, as they themselves did* * ; directed some of these to appoint others †, as *feeders of the flock, under Christ the chief shepherd* ‡; required them to *exhort and rebuke with all authority* §, and commanded christians to *submit to them, as watchmen over their souls, who must give account* ¶.

God forbid, that you should have cause to be alarmed at the highest of these claims. The same scripture on which they are founded, guards against it sufficiently. As to temporal matters : our Saviour's *kingdom is not of this world* || ; nor have his ministers, as such, any peculiar right to interfere in the affairs of it. *The Lord indeed hath ordained, that they who preach the gospel, should live of the gospel* **. But what provision should be made for that purpose, he hath left intirely to the conscience and the prudence of men. Our authority of demanding even a maintenance from the unwilling, and certainly then the further privileges that any of us enjoy, are derived solely from the voluntary gift of the civil power. And as to spiritual concerns : the very apostles were bound to teach only what their master commanded. And they indeed could not mistake any part of it : but we may ; and therefore you are not obliged to believe implicitly what we affirm. So far still as persons are sensible, that they cannot determine for themselves, they should follow their established guides, if they have reason to think them skilful and honest. But to all others we apply as St. Paul did : *I speak as to wise men : judge ye what I say* ††.

Whatever appears true to any man by his own reason, or to any christian by the word of God, he ought to observe, though no one remind him of it. And whatever any one else proved to him, though absolutely unauthorised, he is bound to admit. But when God himself, knowing man's need and yet unwillingness to be taught, hath expressly ordained a succession of persons to execute that employment : if either we neglect to give, or you to receive instruction, it is a highly aggravated contempt of his authority, and of his mercy. *We have indeed this treasure in earthen vessels* †† : and too often add sins to our in-

VOL. II.

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firmities,

* 1 Cor. xvi. 10.

† 2 Tim. ii. 2. Tit. i. 5.

‡ 1 Pet. v. 2, 4.

§ Tit. ii. 5.

¶ Heb. xiii. 17.

|| John xvii. 36.

** 1 Cor. ix. 14.

†† 1 Cor. x. 15.

†† 2 Cor. iv. 7.

firmities, by which we dishonour him we represent, and shall bring down severe punishment on our own heads. But still, as in temporal societies, officers, though bad and unfit men, must be duly obeyed, as far as their commission extends, in respect to the supreme power, under which they act; so in the spiritual one of the church, when you hear the truths of religion from the worst of us all, you are to receive them as the word of God, for such indeed they are, not as the word of men. And a message from him deserves the utmost honour; let them, who bring it, deserve what they will.

Are you then, careful to regard what we say the more, if there be reason to think well of us; but as little prejudiced against it as possible, if there be not: or do you slight the commands of your Maker, when they come by a person whom you do not esteem, or barely do not like? But if you like him ever so well, attend on him ever so constantly, applaud him ever so highly, and stop there; you have done nothing. It is not entertainment, it is *the law*, that you are to *seek at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts* *. You are to look beyond us, to the end of our mission: not to pay us any such deference, even for that, as may endanger our humility, lessen our usefulness, and pervert us into instruments of harm instead of good; but only to excite in your minds, from a due veneration of him who sends us, a due attention to what the text mentions.

II. The errand he sends us upon. Were that merely to notify a doctrine ever so strange, short of palpable absurdity, a command ever so difficult, a threatening ever so severe, you would be bound to receive it, on the authority of proper credentials, with the most submissive reverence. But what is the message, that his ministers bring you from him? *Be ye reconciled to God*. Surely a most gracious, but at the same time a very alarming one. For you will say, are we enemies to him then? Why doubtless the expression implies, that possibly we may. And it is our highest concern to inquire immediately, (if we have not done it) whether we be or not.

By nature we are children of wrath: involved in the mortality, to which our first parents were condemned; in the corruption, with which they tainted themselves. We experience
both.

* Mat. ii. 7.

† Eph. ii. 3.

both. And God must consider our bad inclinations, however we came by them, with dislike as well as pity : and may justly leave us in this fallen estate, unless we make use of the proper means to be relieved from it. What care then have you taken in this respect? “ *We have been by baptism regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s church* * : and we have personally ratified since, the vow then made in our name.” You have done well : and these things intitle you to assistance from above for amending yourselves, and to eternal life on condition of your endeavouring it faithfully. But all men have broken this condition by actual sin. What have you done then to renew your covenant? Have you lamented your failings, and redoubled your watchfulness : or have you tamely given way to irregular appetites and passions? Have you not indeed striven to excuse, to justify, to encourage, to make provision for them? sometimes perhaps you have resisted them : but from what principle? From that of conscience towards God : or of interest, convenience, reputation only? If the latter, they are no religious motives. If the former, have you resisted in all sorts of temptations, and in the main successfully? “ No : we must own, we have commonly been overpowered ; and are so still.” Why, in proportion as this is your case, both reason and scripture pronounce it a bad one : for *without holiness, habitual piety and virtue, no man shall see the Lord* †. Are you then trying all methods to increase your strength : or do you give up the contest ; sometimes perhaps a little grieved ; but oftener secretly glad, that you have gotten so specious a pretence, as that of your weakness, for living as you like?

But you will say, how are we to increase our strength? partly, by representing to yourselves, seriously and frequently, the baseness and the danger of sinning against God ; by avoiding resolutely the things and the persons, that incline you to it ; by reading good books, and hearing good advice in public and private. Something of all this you have probably done : but whether near so much as you could, ask your own hearts. Or supposing you have : there is one essential point wanting. Have you applied to your heavenly Father for his help? Scripture and experience prove, that *we are not sufficient of ourselves* ‡. Now he is completely able, he is intirely willing, he

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hath

* Office of baptism.

† Heb. xii. 14.

‡ 2 Cor. iii. 5

hath expressly promised, to assist us. But he justly expects, that we should own our dependance on him, by asking his aid. And if we are too proud, or too negligent for that, he leaves us to the consequences. "Yes: but we have prayed, as well as endeavoured, and all to no purpose." But how have you prayed? Only as a matter of course perhaps, without much persuasion, that it would do you any great good; without inward penitence and humiliation; without attention and earnestness; or however without due perseverance. And what can you expect from such prayers?

But supposing, that you are satisfied with yourselves on these heads, what plea have you made to God for his pardon and help? "That of his infinite mercy." But his mercy flows to mankind in a particular channel. *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself*, as the verse before the text teaches. Have you then applied through him? persons ignorant of him indeed cannot: and the judge of all will undoubtedly consider their case with equity. But if you, to whom he is revealed, seek to be reconciled without him, it is resolving not to be reconciled at all. "No: we have prayed in his name constantly." But hath it been with any inward sense of what he hath done for you, and is to you; with any real faith and trust in his atonement and grace, disclaiming all merit of your own; with any fixed and active resolution to *take his yoke upon you* *, and observe his appointments in order to attain his likeness? possibly you will plead, that such faith and resolution are not in your power: *they are the gift of God* †, as appears from scripture: and therefore it is none of our fault, if you have them not. But it is in your power to yield to *his spirit* when he *strives with you* ‡, to dwell on his convictions of your sins and your danger, to cherish desires of what you want, to endeavour at what you are commanded, to use the means which the gospel prescribes. If you have done thus, go on to do it, and you will infallibly succeed. If not, this is the method, which, *as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead*, to take, that ye may be reconciled to God. Whilst you neglect it, you can be no other than his enemies: and think with yourselves, we beg you, in the next place, how joyless, how terrible a situation that must be.

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* Matth. xi. 29.

† Eph. ii. 8.

‡ Gen. vi. 3.

He is infinitely wise: and therefore knows what is best for us. He is infinitely good: and therefore his directions point it out to us. He is perfectly just and holy: and therefore loves right and abhors wrong behaviour. His power is irresistible, and therefore he can reward or punish to the utmost: his veracity is unquestionable, and therefore he will reward or punish eternally. What can we then promise ourselves by disobedience to him: what may we not promise ourselves by obedience? Our worldly enjoyments, at best, are low and uncertain; our sufferings many and severe; our comforts and supports under them poor and few; a very great part of our time is spent meanly and contemptibly, if not insipidly and tediously. What a situation is this, if we are to take it for our all, without God and without hope! We are strangely apt indeed to flatter ourselves daily with prospects of this and that pleasure and advantage soon to come. But if we look back, what very great and lasting satisfaction hath the highest and the happiest of us ever had: and what better ground is there to expect any in the remainder of our days? Undoubtedly we have enough to be thankful for, and much more than we have deserved. But is it enough to rest in, and desire nothing farther? Shall we feel ourselves persuaded, on cool reflection at the close of life, that going round and round the circle of our present amusements and pursuits, in the manner that we have done, and being disappointed continually by every one of them in its turn, is all the good that a rational soul needs wish; especially while heavenly and eternal bliss lies within our view and within our reach? This would be a groveling way of thinking indeed. But suppose our days are cut short in the middle, or the beginning: suppose our gratifications are peculiarly few; or our distresses peculiarly heavy: still shall we aim at nothing better? At least, shall we not guard against something unspeakably worse? For consider; God is our Maker and Lord: this intitles him to our faithful service. He is our benefactor by all that he hath given, and all that he is ready to give us: this demands our most affectionate gratitude. And if we deny him either, he will and must shew to the whole creation which he governs, that they who sin, shall, unless they apply for pardon in the manner directed by him, suffer in proportion. Now they do not suffer thus here: and therefore they will hereafter. Are you then contented, rather than be reconciled to God, besides
losing

losing the promise of his favour, to undergo, first the terrors, then the torments of his future displeasure, such as his word hath described them? Think a little of this. What should induce you to it?

If love of sensual gratifications tempt you to disobey him: irregular ones will almost always end, and commonly soon, even in present misery. If worldly interest: both forbidden methods, and immoderate desires of promoting it will entangle you in perplexities, disquiet you with solicitude, and stain you with dishonour: you will often miss your aim, and never be long satisfied with obtaining it. If resentment or any species of malevolence biases you, this is being habitually and exquisitely wretched, only for the chance of an occasional joy in mischief, that will make you almost as hateful to man as to God. Or could any of these things afford you a delight ever so unmixed, how very quick is the whole scene of them passing away! Doth pride then rule within you, and represent submission to your Creator, as beneath you? But do you not obey and honour your earthly superiors? Do you not expect your inferiors to shew every appointed, every customary mark of honour and obedience to you; and even an implicit compliance with your directions? Why then is not the author and absolute disposer of your being, worthy of the most unreserved duty, the most respectful homage; and where is the meanness of paying it?

But you are apprehensive perhaps of being despised and ridiculed for your piety and virtue. But shall you not be approved and applauded by the wise and good, by many of the bad themselves, by the judge of all and his holy angels at the great day? But, it may be, you have doubts about religion: and therefore you do not set heartily to practise it. Seek for information properly then, and hearken to it fairly. Practise conscientiously what you cannot doubt of: keep to the safer side, where you do doubt: make sure, that no sinful inclination, prejudices you: be content, though you do not see every thing, if you see enough to direct your steps; and you will soon discern, which way is best to take. But you are afraid of not persevering: or though you should, of not succeeding. Try however at least. Honest endeavours, if they do no more, will alleviate your guilt. But by continuing them, you must gain some ground: and should you fall after that, and seem

to lose it ; you may rise again, and learn skill from your defeats to obtain at last the victory. Using the prescribed means, you have God's promise for it : and how small soever your own strength may be, his hath no bounds.

Why doubtless, you will say, he can do every thing ; but you have been a great sinner ; and you know not how to think he will either help or even forgive you. And certain it is, that you have not deserved it : nor can you, of yourself, be sure of it. But, still common reason, gives you some hope. You are frail : he is good : his forbearance is a degree of forgiveness. Repenting, confessing, striving, must render your condition better, than a contrary behaviour would. How much indeed, he himself alone can tell. And therefore, if you want further encouragement, as well you may, look into his holy word. There he had granted *knowledge of salvation to his people, by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace* *. Nay our offended benefactor and lawgiver and judge, not only permits, but *beseeches you to be reconciled*. Nor hath he sent this request by a common messenger, but by his only Son, *who had glory with him before the world was* †, *who in the beginning was with God, and was God* ‡. Nor hath he sent him, barely to make a publication of it, from heaven, and return ; but to take upon him our nature, bear the inconveniences of a low condition of life, suffer indignities, persecution and death ; to reconcile forgiving goodness with justice and wisdom ; to notify, to prove, to conquer prejudices against the blessed union of these attributes. Nor even, after all this, hath he left men to remember his gracious invitation, or forget it, as they please : but established a perpetual succession of persons, authorized and commanded to repeat it, weekly and daily, in public and in private, to every age, every nation, every sinner ; and enforce it by the strongest motives, that can affect the human heart ; but especially that most engaging one, which follows the text : *Be ye reconciled to God ; for he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*.

So

* Luke i. 77, 78, 79.

† John xvii. 5.

‡ John i. 1.

So astonishing a method, we may be sure, had never been taken, had not God, who knows best, seen our case was too bad for less powerful remedies. And the goodness of our heavenly Father in appointing this, of his Son in submitting to it, of his Holy Spirit in applying it to our diseased hearts, is, as the apostle justly expresses himself, *a love that passeth knowledge**. That thus much should be done for any offenders, is beyond all imagination: yet it is done for the very worst. But then all this mercy is conditional: its final effect depends on ourselves. And *how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation*, thus obtained for us: which *at first began to be spoken by the Lord, was confirmed by them that heard him*†, and is offered to you, and pressed upon you continually by his ministers, who act for him, represent him, and beseech you in his stead? Every step, taken for your recovery, aggravates your guilt, if it be taken in vain. And there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins‡, no other ministry of reconciliation§, if you omit to be reconciled by this.

“But, you will say, we hope we are at peace with God.” If you hope it on good grounds, his name be praised. But what grounds have you? “We attend his worship: we live regular lives: few, if any, of our neighbours, better.” But do you attend all the ordinances of his worship, and constantly; and, to the best of your power, with your minds, as well as bodies? Are your lives regular in every thing, and no wrong inclinations, either of flesh or spirit, indulged? Think a while of this. What your neighbours are, you know but imperfectly; and it concerns you but little: both they and you shall be condemned, if you are not what you ought. Possibly enough you stand well in the estimation of men: but are you faultless in the eyes of God? Certainly not. For *in his sight shall no man living be justified*||. Every deed, every word, every thought, hath its failure and guilt belonging to it. Are you then convinced of your fallen and lost condition, of the imperfection, the insufficiency, the sinfulness of what is best in you; deeply humble, on this account, before *the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy*¶; sensible of your need of his pardon and grace; thankful believers
in

* Eph. iii. 19.

† Heb. ii. 3.

‡ Heb. x. 26.

§ 1 Cor. v. 18.

¶ Ps. cxliii. 2.

¶ Is. lvii. 15.

in the satisfaction of his Son, in the sanctifying influences of his Spirit? Do you accordingly pray to him daily in private, from the bottom of your soul; examine diligently your outward behaviour, your inward movements of heart, as in his presence; yield up yourselves to his will, and make it your great aim to serve and please him: not only in acts of faith and devotion, (though indispensable and most important duties) but in a conduct of benevolence and equity, of mildness, usefulness and bounty to all your fellow-creatures; in lowliness of mind, in chastity, sobriety and temperance? Have you considered well, not merely what your own very fallible, and perhaps very partial, reasonings suggest to you, but what his word requires of you? Are you honestly careful to observe all its rules: and do you find produced in yourselves by them, a spirit of love and duty to God; and a desire, superior to all others, of enjoying a spiritual happiness for ever with him? What is the answer of your consciences to these questions?

If an unfavourable one: do not despair, be it ever so much so: for we have an high priest, *able to save to the uttermost them that come to God by him**. But lose not a moment's time: press home your convictions on your souls; beg his intercession, plead his merits, follow his directions, *acquaint yourselves with him, and be at peace*†. If it be a doubtful answer: can you bear to continue in doubt concerning your great, your eternal interest; impatient as you are apt to be of uncertainty in very small matters? That would be a bad sign indeed. "But how shall we remove the doubt?" Not by perplexing yourselves with guesses in the dark: but by removing the cause. Whatever you find amiss, after praying to God for pardon and strength, set immediately to amend; and in proportion to your progress, you will have the only true ground of comfort. For *hereby know we, that we know him, if we keep his commandments*‡. Whoever doth so, though imperfectly, yet sincerely and humbly, hath nothing to fear: whoever doth not, hath nothing to hope. Strong feelings of joyful assurance may be given to the pious from above, as a present reward: and strong feelings of vain presumption may lead on the wicked, secure and triumphant, to their final destruction. Very reasonable terrors, from consciousness of their guilt, may torment the bad beforehand: and very unreasonable ones, from constitution, or the sugges-

VOL. II.

X x

tions

* Heb. vii. 25.

† Job xxii. 27.

‡ 1 John ii. 3.

tions of Satan, may assault the good. Therefore we are to judge of our condition by none of these things; but by the scripture rule, fairly interpreted: *Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doth righteousness is righteous: he that committeth sin, is of the devil**.

If then obedience to the gospel is the principle, by which you designedly and habitually govern your lives: thank God for it, take comfort in it and be happy, whatever befalls you in this world. But still remember, that every degree of sin remaining is a degree of enmity remaining: and who hath not need *to be reconciled* more completely? St. Paul had already told the persons, to whom he speaks in the text, that *his hope of them was steadfast; knowing, that as they were partakers of the sufferings of Christ, they should be partakers of his consolation also†*. But notwithstanding this, he continues to beseech them, *be ye reconciled to God*. If we see into ourselves at all, the best of us must see, that there are many things in us, which we cannot approve. If we have any due sense of his goodness to us, and of love to him in return: we shall earnestly wish and labour to be more pleasing to him, and more like him. If we have any experience of what is true happiness here, or any ambition of a high rank in happiness hereafter, we shall surely reflect, that both depend on our improvements in pure religion and genuine virtue. If we have any right apprehension of the dangers, that surround us, we must foresee, that unless we press forward, we shall be driven back and fall: but the further we advance, on the surer ground we shall stand. And if we have any just zeal for the glory of our blessed Redeemer; we shall deeply lament, that our failings have so frequently given others occasion to *blaspheme that worthy name, whereby we are called‡*; and shall use our utmost endeavours to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things§: which that we may accordingly, he of his infinite mercy grant: to whom be all honour and praise, now and for ever. Amen.

* John iii. 7, 8.

† 1 Cor. i. 7.

‡ James ii. 7.

§ Tit. ii. 10.

S E R M O N LXXI.

THE PRESENT DISADVANTAGES, SHAMEFULNESS, AND
PUNISHMENT OF A WICKED LIFE.

ROM. vi. 21.

*What fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now
ashamed? For the end of those things is death.*

THE first resolution, which every one should take in the conduct of life, is to deliberate seriously, as soon as he becomes capable of it, by what rule his future behaviour shall be formed. And one principal cause of the follies, which men commit, and the miseries into which they fall, is their strange neglect of this obvious duty: a duty impossible to be controverted; for it is only inquiring what will be most for our interest.

And yet a very great part of mankind never once think of any certain rule at all for their conduct; but go on at random, indulging the present inclination, which way soever it leads, and how often soever it may vary: and thus fill up a life of thoughtless inconsistency, aiming at no one end beyond pleasing themselves any how for the time, let what will follow. But surely a very little reflection might shew, that what pleases us now, may ruin us ere long, perhaps very soon: that different courses of life have very different consequences, highly deserving our attention: and in particular, that those of a virtuous and a vicious life differ so extremely, that we ought not to continue an hour undetermined, longer than we must, which we shall pursue. What the prophet *Elijah* said to the *Israelites* belongs equally to all of this unsettled character: *How long halt ye between two opinions? If*

*the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him**. Why this perpetual wavering and fluctuation, about the first thing, that you ought to fix; the one point, on which all depends! If a profane and immoral conduct will produce and secure happiness to you, follow profaneness and immorality, *yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin†*. But if religion and virtue be the means of true and lasting self-enjoyment, let religion and virtue be your care, and *yield yourselves servants of righteousness unto God†*. *Chuse ye therefore this day, whom ye will serve§*.

And there are indeed multitudes, that would give sufficient proofs of having made a choice, and a very ill one, if running headlong into wickedness merited the name of chusing it. But rational choice presupposes due consideration: whereas these poor wretches have suffered themselves to be led on blindfold, by example and custom, unexamined appearances and ungoverned inclinations, with no more notion of inquiring, whether they are in the right road, than if there were no other at all. Or if ever they have deliberated, they have done it unfairly or superficially; or upon some one point of their behaviour, not the whole; and perhaps, only which of two interfering desires, both of them wrong, they should gratify. But surely the first division of human conduct is into religious and irreligious. Which of these two we ought to prefer, is the question that we are to begin with: and it will be time enough to consider, in what way we shall be bad, after we have examined, whether it is not our wisdom to be good.

In this most important inquiry an imperfect view of things may easily deceive us, and doth in fact deceive the generality of mankind. We must therefore be very careful to lay before ourselves the whole of what is to be expected, hoped or feared. But indeed both our own passions and appetites, and the opinions and practices of the world, will be sure to remind us abundantly of what makes in favour of prohibited indulgences. And consequently in order to keep our judgement upright, we must be diligent in representing to ourselves what makes against them. And we cannot possibly do it in a better method, than that of the apostle, addressing himself to the *Roman converts*:

* 1 Kings xviii. 21.

† Rom. vi. 13, 19.

† Rom. vi. 13.

§ Josh. xxiv. 15.

verts: *What fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death.*

In these words is proposed to our serious thoughts,

I. The present unprofitableness of sin.

II. The shamefulnefs of it.

III. The punishment, which awaits it.

I shall be able in this discourse to consider only the first point, the unprofitableness of sin, even at present. And for this he appeals to the hearts and consciences of those, with whom he argues: *what fruit had ye then in those things?* well knowing they must own, that upon trial they had found none: a confession, which very few have ever failed to make, when after a life, spent in wickedness, they came to reflect coolly, what real advantage they had gained by it on the upshot. The language of those, who will be prevailed on to balance the great account, is almost universally the same, which *Elibu* in *Job* ascribes to the penitent, *I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not**. Some may imagine this to arise from a disposition, which we have, to be discontented; and to think, after a while, any other way better, than that which we have chosen. But how comes it to pass then, that no pious and virtuous man was ever known, calmly and deliberately, to make the same declaration concerning his manner of life? Nothing hath been more common in all ages, than for the wicked to acknowledge their mistakes and their misery, and exhort others to take warning by them. But the good, as soon as ever they had time to become habitually such, have always pronounced themselves easy and happy; and thought it the greatest kindness, that they could do to those, whom they loved the most tenderly, to beg they would tread in their steps. Now, in other cases, we look on the agreeing testimony of those who have experienced what they affirm, as being decisive. Why then should we distrust them in this alone; and obstinately insist upon trying what they forewarn us aloud will be fatal? Indeed have not some of us tried much too far already? And for God's sake, let us ask ourselves, what fruit we have had from it, and what we are likely to have, in case we proceed further.

But

* *Job xxxiii. 27.*

But if we will reckon the experience of others incompetent, and our own imperfect, let us consider the natural tendency of sin. Should we be unable to discover from thence, why it should do us harm, we may doubt whether it doth the harm, that we are told, or will go on to do the harm, that we have hitherto felt from it: but if we see, that in its nature it must be unprofitable and hurtful, as well as learn from the experience of others and our own that it is so, then surely nothing will be wanting to convince us.

Now we all know, however apt we are to forget it, that reason is the principal part of our frame: thence therefore, if we are made with any wisdom, we must expect the principal part of our happiness: and yet every sort of wickedness is absolutely contradictory to reason. Undutifulness to an almighty superior; and ingratitude to a gracious benefactor, such as God is; unkindness to our relations and friends, hard-heartedness to persons in distress, injustice or implacability to any one, or uselessness to those, who are useful to us: degrading ourselves below the rank of our nature, and living only or chiefly to brutal appetites, though we are men; or to trifling pleasures, though we have capacities for much worthier employments: all these things are evidently unreasonable and unfit, as any thing can be. And what advantage or what quiet can we hope in disobeying that principle, which was plainly designed to rule us?

Besides, our affections were doubtless originally intended to accord with reason: and, though much disordered by the fall of our first parents, yet in a considerable measure they do so still. Now can we question, but that disorder is the cause of misery to us here? And if so, the greater we make it by acts of sin, the greater our misery will be; and the more we rectify it by acts of piety and virtue, the nearer we shall return to our natural state, in which alone every thing flourishes and doth well. Right reason and right affection were the primitive rules, that God gave man to live by: and how can we fancy that we shall ever find our account in putting a force upon them, and wresting ourselves from under their government!

But a farther and very material consideration is, that all kinds of wickedness manifestly tend to destroy the good order, prosperity and peace, of kingdoms, of communities, of families; and

and that indeed the injuries which men do to one another by transgressing the laws of God make up the heaviest and bitterest part of the sufferings of life. Now what is contrary to the interest of all in general, must be in some degree prejudicial to that of every one in particular : and each person who is guilty of it, *teaches others an evil lesson against himself**. The vicious, even those who value themselves the most on their good nature, are one way or another, perhaps many ways, perpetually doing mischief. They are indeed enemies, as far as their influence reaches, to the whole society of mankind. It is the general interest of the world to oppose and discourage them. It is the particular business of government to restrain and punish them. All that suffer considerably by them, will be sure to abominate them : and most others will scorn and despise them. Now it is a dreadful evil to lose a blessing so justly dear to men, as that of a good name and reputation. To be abhorred, or even suspected and distrusted, by those amongst whom we live, is hardly supportable : to be merely disliked and disapproved, is very mortifying. Yet one or other of these they must expect : not only from the religious and worthy, whose esteem ought to be and ever will be chiefly desired, but also from their fellow-sinners ; who constantly condemn the sins, which they do not practise, and often those which they do. Sometimes indeed some of them may join in applauding their common follies : but that makes them never the less follies. Sometimes, for private ends, persons may flatter for a while such as they inwardly hold in derision of detestation. But this kind of court never doth good to those who receive it : nor is it able to hinder but that on the whole mischievous vices will produce hatred, and imprudent ones contempt. And what fruit can men reap from such things ?

But hitherto you have heard proofs only of the common ill effects of all sins : let us now consider the several sorts, and the fruits of each of them, separately.

Some of our bad inclinations are necessarily, in the very feeling of them, uneasy and painful : as envy, hatred and anger. Others are so at least in their immediate consequences : disquieting our minds with wearisome and endless pursuits, of what we shall either not obtain, or not keep, or be little or
nothing

* Eccles ix. 1.

nothing the better for, if we do. Such is the exorbitant thirst of power and rank and wealth: always restless and dissatisfied, always full of discontents and disappointments. Again, some of them prompt us to overvalue ourselves often to our great damage; and at the same time provoke others to undervalue us; as do pride and vanity. Some, if they are accompanied with no pain, yet can make no pretence to giving any pleasure: as profaneness. And the seeming pleasure of some others is in reality scarce more than getting rid of a torment, which a good mind would never have experienced. Such, and no better, is the joy of revenge. Nay, where criminal gratifications are the most agreeable, as in sensual indulgences; besides that they are usually very fleeting and short-lived, perhaps an equal, perhaps a superior degree of them upon the whole, might by the means of prudence have been obtained consistently with virtue: which doth not forbid the regular and seasonable and temperate satisfaction of any desire, but only restrains us within due and safe bounds: whereas the vicious, affecting immoderate and prohibited liberties, are indeed the unhappiest slaves to their own lusts and fancies; especially when by a habit of yielding to them, they have taught them to claim, with absolute authority, the most pernicious compliances. And in this situation, how much inward anguish must there often lie hid under the gayest shews of mirth and amusement; whether the soul be oppressed by the settled tyranny of a single passion, or torn in pieces by the rage of opposite ones, contending for mastery *! Then, what destructive effects the sins of this kind have on the healths and fortunes of their votaries, disqualifying them, often in the beginning of life, for the enjoyment of every thing in which they placed the happiness of it, and exposing them to great distresses and sufferings throughout the remainder, is much too well known to need enlarging on, though much less considered, than its importance requires.

But too many imagine, that, whatever others do, they shall sin with discretion: gratify their inclinations, and carry on their designs

* Sic distrahuntur in contrarias partes impotentium cupiditates; cum huic obsecutus sis, illi est repugnandum. Cic. Tusc. Disp. l. 5. §. 25. Intus etiam in animis inclusæ cupiditates inter se dissident atque discordant; ex quo vitam amarissimam necesse est effici. Cic. de Fin. l. 1. §. 13. Comp. §. 18.

designs, of whatever sort they be, with so much art, as to avoid all manner of bad consequences. But why do they imagine so? It is hard enough to govern our passions before they have been accustomed to indulgence. But first to indulge them, and then think to stop where we please, is a scheme that always hath deceived, and always will deceive, those who are weak enough to rely upon it. Virtuous behaviour hath plain and firm ground to stand upon: but if once we quit our sure footing there, the declivity is endless, the tendency downwards will increase every moment, and how far we may be carried, God only knows. They have gone the most fatal lengths in sin, resolved at first, as much as you can do, to proceed cautiously: never once questioning but they could keep their resolution, till it was too late. And it may very soon be too late with any of us. For not only the habit of every vice leads men farther and farther in it, but the most different vices are strangely connected with each other: and he who intended to allow himself in but one seemingly harmless transgression, is drawn by it gradually, or hurried unawares, into numbers of worse, that end in his ruin; the grace of God being justly withdrawn from such presumptuous offenders.

But it will be objected, that however unprofitable some sins may be, yet others are peculiarly calculated for profit; as covetousness, with its retainers, fraud and extortion: which the *wise in their generation* * would never practise, unless they found the advantage of them, as they visibly do. Now if by advantage be meant, what should be meant, real happiness, they visibly do not. Covetousness is peculiarly a miserable passion: and distinguished by that very name of *miserable* in common speech. The temper itself is full of fears and cares, alarms and suspicions. Then, in order to gratify it, every benevolent, if not every honest, disposition of our hearts must be contradicted; and when it rises to a certain height, every innocent enjoyment of life, that carries the least expence with it, must either be renounced, or grudged while it is tolerated. But without running to such extremes, to all avaricious minds the smallest losses will be heavy misfortunes; and the greatest gains will want something of being so great as they should have been. They must undergo the pain of envying every one that is in circum-

* Luke xvi. 8.

stances above them : they must expect at the same time the ill-will of every one beneath them : and after all, their unnatural cravings, far from being appeased, will increase much faster, than their possessions ; and the more eagerly they endeavour to quench their thirst, the more fiercely it will return upon them. Or let us suppose, if you will, the desire of gain to be indulged, not with the absurd view of hoarding to no purpose and no end ; but for the delight of satisfying more natural inclinations by the means of great wealth : yet, if these be moderate and reasonable, they may be very competently satisfied without it ; and, if they be excessive, you have seen already that they are hurtful, and therefore ought not to have provision made for them.

If then covetousness of both sorts be unwise ; fraud and extortion, which only serve as instruments of covetousness, cannot be beneficial. But on the contrary, they have peculiar disadvantages belonging to them. There are indeed instances, too frequently, of riches acquired by indirect methods : but still dishonesty hath ruined many more than it hath raised : and the ruin of such is never pitied, and seldom retrieved. Fair dealing is the plain path, which God hath marked out for mankind to go in : and they who think to be too cunning for their Maker, are few of them able to depart from it without injuring themselves even now, as much or more than they do others. One half of the contrivance and circumspection, that men are obliged to in a knavish way, would have enabled them to thrive very well in an honest one, without the hatred and curse of all around them, without the perpetual dread of being detected, and the loss they must suffer, whenever that happens, (which seldom fails,) both by others declining to have any further concern with them, and perhaps by the penalties which the law will inflict on them. Or let them escape these dangers ever so well ; yet how often doth it fall out, that either what they have acquired wickedly, they squander foolishly, it may be wickedly too, and so nothing remains with them but the guilt of both ; or, at least, posterity, for whose sake chiefly they have taken these unrighteous pains, dissipate in a few years what they have been accumulating in many ; and very possibly give them the torment, which they have well deserved, of shewing them beforehand, that they will dissipate it ! And thus is the
scripture

scripture warning verified : *An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning ; but the end thereof shall not be blessed* *.

You see then how many and great the present and worldly inconveniences of wickedness are ; and I have dwelt on them so largely, because present and worldly things are apt to affect us so much. Yet still it must be acknowledged, that all of them do not follow constantly, and that sometimes considerable advantages in appearance may be gained by transgressing our duty. But perhaps even then as considerable ones of the same kind may be lost by it ; for men cannot have the benefit of two opposite characters and behaviours at the same time. Or, if every thing should happen to their wish, the probability notwithstanding lay greatly on the other side : the contrary was to have been expected : and therefore no wise person would ever run the hazard, though now and then some one may chance to find his account in it.

But indeed we are as yet only in the first article of the account ; and have by no means completed that. Not only the positive outward evils, that wickedness brings upon us, but the inward satisfactions and comforts of which it deprives us, must be taken in. Sincerity of good will, openness of confidence, faithfulness of friendship, tenderness of affection, consciousness of merited esteem, are the sweetest ingredients in human life. Now all these, with all the complacency and joy of heart that flows from them, the wicked, by their ambitious, their covetous, their sensual pursuits, by their resentments, their falsehoods, their neglects, their provocations, exclude themselves from enjoying : wear out from their hearts by degrees the most delightful sensibilities of which human nature is capable ; and leave nothing there, but the wretched feelings of hating or disregarding others, and being hated or disregarded by them. Then, in the various afflictions and crosses of life, in decaying health, sinking spirits, and declining age, a good man hath many supports, from the innocence and integrity of his past life, from the love and gratitude of his friends, from the firm belief of a wise and kind providence, continually watching over him. But none of these consolations belong to a wicked man, when he is in the same condition : the things in which he placed his whole happiness have failed him and are gone ; the companions

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* Prov. xx. 21.

of his prosperity desert him, the world rejoices over him, heaven frowns upon him, and his own heart condemns him.

But this would lead me to the second head, the shame attending sin. After that, there remains a third, of the future punishment awaiting it. Both these, God willing, shall be distinctly set before you: and then you will see in the fullest light, whatever may seem wanting to the evidence of it now, that *the knowledge of wickedness is not wisdom; neither at any time the counsel of flatterers, prudence* *.

God grant we may all be convinced of this while it will do us good! To him, with his Son and blessed Spirit, be all honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

* Eccles xix. 22.

S E R M O N LXXII.

THE PRESENT DISADVANTAGES, SHAMEFULNESS, AND
PUNISHMENT OF A WICKED LIFE.

ROM. vi. 21.

*What fruit had ye then in those things, whereof ye are now
ashamed? For the end of those things is death.*

I N discoursing on these words, I have proposed to lay before
you,

I. The present disadvantages of a wicked life.

II. The shamefulness of it.

III. The punishment, which awaits it hereafter.

The first of these heads I have finished : and shewn, from the testimony of the wicked themselves, from the inconsistency of all sin with the principles of our reason, from its repugnancy to the original dictates of our affections, from its pernicious influence on every branch of human society, that it must in general produce unspeakable harm to us. Then I proceeded to prove, in relation to several sins more particularly, that some of them are in their very nature painful ; and that the pleasures, which others promise, are either false and imaginary, or inconsiderable and short-lived, or, to all the purposes of real happiness, equally attainable, for the most part, by virtuous means : but that the evils, which they bring on, are various and great, and often speedy, and seldom avoided by the utmost care : that even those sins which may seem peculiarly calculated for profit and advantage, are in truth as unprofitable and hurtful as the rest : and that lastly, besides leading men into the most grievous inconveniences and sufferings, wickedness deprives them of the
most

most valuable even of their worldly enjoyments, comforts, and supports.

Were we therefore only to consider, how unhappily it affects all the common and acknowledged ingredients of our present well-being, a course of sin, on stating the account merely thus, would be found, though perhaps not without exceptions, yet with but few exceptions, and such as no one could rationally expect in his own favour, a course of folly : as accordingly we see it constantly represented, even with respect to this world, not only by the sacred writers, but the greatest and ablest of heathens themselves ; but such as had some belief of a future state, and such as had none.

But for our fuller satisfaction in a point of this moment, let us proceed farther to consider,

II. The shamefulnefs of it.

Now shame is of two sorts : arising from a consciousness of having acted, either foolishly against our interest, or wickedly against our duty. I begin with the first.

An immoral life being so full of imprudence and suffering as you have seen it is, many and severe reflections on their own mistaken choice must unavoidably torture the minds of the vicious from time to time, be they ever so industrious to banish them. The absurdity of the things, which they say and do in the madness of their debauches ; the contemptibleness of their condition, while they languish under the effects of them : the miserable wages, which they receive for their hard servitude to low appetites ; the meanness of going on with what they have a thousand times resolved to leave off ; the wretched shifts, that they must use to support the expences of their irregularities ; the embarrassments into which the most circumspect of them are continually running by unfair practices ; the grievous disappointments, which the wisest of them experience, from what promised, as they imagined, the truest and highest satisfaction ; the extraordinary pains which they have taken, to be never the happier, and are taking still, only to be farther from their end than ever : these are considerations, that will find a season to make their way both into the gayest and the busiest minds, and often embitter the relish of their pleasures and their prosperity, even while they are at the height.

But when any remarkable check hath been given to the sinner in his course ; when the iniquities of the fraudulent have

have exposed him to disgrace and loss, or the extravagances of the spendthrift reduced him to indigence, when the strength and spirits of the dissolute are worn out, or advancing years have brought on satiety and disgust: then, with full leisure for thinking of their doings, and perhaps inability for thinking of any thing else, to see that they have scorned the dictates of reason and the counsels of the discreet and good, only to become miserable: what confusion must they feel from it: they, who applauded so highly the wisdom of their own way of life, as the only one worth living for, and ridiculed with such unspeakable contempt the silly scruples of the poor virtuous man, whose conduct they now find so vastly preferable to their own!

But further: this inward self-displeasure and dislike will, in such cases, be greatly aggravated by the censure and upbraiding of the world, redoubled upon them when they can bear it least. Sinners in distress are usually despised and condemned by their very tempters, and partners in sin. All, whom they have injured, will claim a right to insult them. Those, to whom they apply for assistance or comfort, will have a specious plea for disregarding and rejecting them. The generality will be eager to shew the superiority, some of their goodness, and some of their prudence, by reproaching them bitterly for their want of both. Even the best and best-natured persons, while they mourn over them, must remind them how unwise they have been; and on proper occasions mention them as warning to others. *Lo, this is the man, that made not God his strength, but strengthened himself in his wickedness**. Now think, I beg you, what must their feelings, amidst all this, be!

But, besides the shame of folly, they have a much worse kind to undergo, that of guilt, from the consciousness, that their behaviour hath been wrong and unworthy and of ill desert. For with what indifference soever many may affect to speak of this, all have at times, a sense of it extremely acute. Let any one ask his heart, what it thinks, when seriously disposed, of ingratitude for the being, which God hath bestowed on us, and the blessings, present and future, which he hath provided for us: of wilful and contemptuous disobedience to laws, so reasonable and beneficial, as he hath enjoined us; so scorn-
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* Psal. lli. 7.

fully slighting such offers of pardon and acceptance, as our blessed Redeemer hath purchased for us by his death, and made us in his gospel; of neglecting the means appointed for our spiritual improvement, quenching the inward suggestions of our heavenly monitor, and *doing despite unto the spirit of grace**. Let any one reflect what his deliberate sentiments are of falsehood and treachery, of oppression and violence, of cruelty and implacability, of hard-heartedness and insensibility; what impressions it naturally makes on him to see innocence betrayed to ruin under pretence of tender affection, the peace and honour of families violated, or the due order of society destroyed, to gratify a lewd appetite; to see a rational creature degrade himself below a beast by intemperance, and abandon those to distress, for whom he is bound by the strongest ties to make provision. How do these things look in others? How would they look to you, if you were the sufferer by them? Only remember therefore, that they are just the same, when you are the doer of them; and then say, if wickedness of every kind doth not abound in guilt, and merit severe punishment.

Indeed hath not every sinner, especially at his first entrance into sin, had powerful convictions of this truth: found that there were persons, whom he could not see without confusion and dismay; actions, which he could not think of, without hating himself? And what can make any one amends for being in such circumstances? He may hope indeed, that in time he shall get rid of these troublesome sensations; and may persuade himself, that afterwards he shall be in as good a condition, as if there were no ground for them. But surely most abandoned must they be, who can delight in such an imagination: who having once known what shame is, can be content to live on in a course of shameful actions in hopes of losing by degrees the perception of which are so, and which otherwise. What should we think of a person, who after discerning clearly the despicableness of folly, should consent to be changed into an idiot, merely that he might play the fool without restraint from within; and should fancy it to be comfort enough, that then he should not know the difference? Yet this man would be chiefly an object of pity: but the others, of utter detestation. And even this ignominious hope of theirs will certainly de-
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* Heb. x. 20.

ceive them. For the faculty of moral reflection, conscience, is planted in us by our Maker for this very purpose, that we may approve or condemn ourselves, according as we act well or ill; and if our understandings be at all cultivated by education, it usually gains vigour enough to answer the purpose, and cannot easily be rooted out. Whether we will be the better for its admonitions is in our own power; else we should not be free agents: but feel them we must. And the many contrivances, which the vicious use to lay the sense of their vileness asleep, and the desperate resolutions which they frequently take when they cannot do it, are abundant proofs, how sharp the pain of guilty reflection may become.

Some indeed profligately boast of having got over it: and a few perhaps may; though not near so many, as will at times pretend they have. But what long and tormenting struggles must they probably have experienced first: and in how deplorable a state must the benumbing and stupifying of so important a principle of their nature have left them! The loss of bodily feeling and motion is but a faint image of it, and after all no one can be secure, that something may not still awaken this dormant power, when he least expects it. Some great and mortifying disappointment, some remarkable stroke of God's providence, some alarming passage in his word, some affecting discourse from the pulpit, some experimental confession of a fellow sinner, nay merely some instantaneous turn in his mind, for which it is impossible to account, may present on a sudden a most tremendous view of himself to his own eyes: or some other person may be induced or provoked to lay his crimes in order before his face, perhaps before the world. And then, whatever ascendant he may have gained over his conscience before, imposing on it with specious colours, or calling off its attention from his past behaviour, yet then he will be forced to behold things as they are; and appear not only wretched and guilty to himself, but an object of abhorrence to others. Now general bad opinion is hard enough to be borne, even when the mind is supported by innocence: but when infamy is accompanied with the conviction of deserving it, almost intolerable. For the feeling is not only dreadful in itself, but fills the soul with endless jealousies and suspicions, distracting horrors and fears, even of dangers the least probable.

Wickedness, condemned by her own witness, is very timorous: and

being pressed with conscience, always forecasteth grievous things. The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt: There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked†. Whose notice soever they escape, the very worst, the basest of their deeds lie constantly open to his view: and what shame of face‡ and dread of heart must that awful recollection excite!*

Sometimes indeed these inward pangs drive men, as it was intended they should, to deep humiliation, to prayer for pardon, to laying hold on God's mercy through the merits of Christ, to zealous amendment, through the aid of the holy Spirit. And then it is doubtless happy to have felt them; but by no means to have committed the iniquity, that caused them: for an equally devout application to heaven with a greater degree of innocence, would have been still more graciously received, and more bountifully rewarded: unless they to whom *many sins are forgiven, love much§*, and work diligently in proportion; which many unquestionably have done: but who can promise himself that he shall do it, and shall be allowed to experience the joy of doing it? On the contrary, as the self-condemnation, which produced this mighty change must have been extremely painful during the accomplishment of it; so afterwards, and perhaps long afterwards, it may prove a burthen heavy enough to convince a very sincere convert, that an early and continued obedience would have been much preferable to his truest repentance. And therefore, as most sinners endeavour to quiet themselves with a prospect of repenting some time or another, they ought most seriously to consider, what remorse and dejection they are treasuring up for themselves in the mean while, though they should do at last what such artful offenders have little cause to believe they ever shall. Observe but the case of those, to whom the text immediately relates. They were *made free from sin*, as the next verse tells us, they had *brought forth fruit unto holiness*, they were in the way to *everlasting life*: yet the apostle calls their past faults, knowing doubtless what he said, *those things whereof ye are now ashamed*. And indeed let any one in the same condition say, whether his comforts are not often embittered,

and

* Wisd. xvii. 11.

† Ps. xlv. 15.

‡ Isa. lvii. 20.

§ Luke vii. 47.

and his prospect clouded, by mortifying remembrances of his former transgressions: whether he hath not frequently returning doubts of God's forgiveness; whether he well knows, how to forgive himself.

But very commonly shame comes at last to surround the sinner on all sides in such a manner, that he is ashamed to repent, though he perceives the necessity of it in the strongest light: and between his agitations of this kind, and the tyranny of his unlawful desires, authorised by habitual indulgence, he is reduced to the most lamentable state that the present life knows or can know: continuing the practice of wickedness with his eyes open to all its deformities and dangers: condemning and abominating himself for what he doth, yet going on to do, what he condemns and abominates.

Thus you see what internal, as well as external, sufferings, naturally belong to irreligious courses. It must however be acknowledged, that though always to be expected, they do not always arise to near the same height. For sometimes the worst of men continue in the most unaccountable prosperity, of health, circumstances, and even reputation. Sometimes also education, example, general custom, false reasoning, may in a considerable measure take off the shame of several sins, and give a sort, such as it is, of credit to them. Some persons likewise either have originally, or soon acquire, such an insensibility of heart or giddy thoughtlessness, that they do not undergo what others do, when they have acted amiss. And therefore, lest any possibility should remain to flatter any one, that he may be wicked, and yet escape what he deserves for it, the apostle, to deter us effectually from sin, hath added in the text,

III. The future punishment, that awaits it, *for the end of these things is death.*

That awful word is well known to signify, in many places of scripture, a state of misery, as life doth of happiness. They are here placed in direct opposition: and the meaning evidently is what our Saviour elsewhere expresses: *These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal*.*

It might be very sufficient to determine the choice of man,

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that

that wickedness essentially tends to produce misery to its authors, and generally doth produce it, though now and then the case were to prove otherwise. But God is further concerned : and the attributes of his nature and the honour of his government require, that no one sinner shall ever have cause, upon the whole, to rejoice in his iniquities, and glory in his disobedience. If our Maker is allwise and almighty, he can provide for this : if he is just and holy, he will. For else this world of his would be ruled, as we ourselves can feel, and much more then must he, that it ought not. Possibly so minute a regard may appear to some, beneath him. But if it was not beneath him to create all things, it can never be so to conduct them to their proper end. If he superintends continually, as he doth, even the least part and movement of the material creation, can it be unfit for him to watch over the actions of rational beings ? For what is there worthy of his attention, if they be not ?

These considerations, confirmed by our inbred sense of the ill desert of wickedness, yet opposed again by instances of its seeming impunity, and by the frequent calamities of the good, raised in the minds of men, from age to age, perplexing doubts concerning the providence of God ; to which however all other things around them gave full testimony. Sometimes they solved the difficulty, by discovering that the seeming happiness of the wicked was not real : sometimes by observing that it soon ended in great misery. Yet they were often forced to take refuge and intrench themselves in their general assurance of the divine justice ; though when and how exercised, they knew not. But there being no appearance at all of a constant and proportionate exercise of it in this life, the wisest and best of them reasonably concluded, there must be another, designed to rectify whatever was wrong here. Yet a future and unseen state of existence, in which we were not to share, till our present frame was dissolved, had the look of an object too remote for human faculties to discern with certainty : so that many good men were tempted to question it ; and those of an opposite character too easily brought themselves to disbelieve it. At least the convictions and presages of it, which they industriously stifled, had no uniform influence on their conduct. And therefore, after various intimations of this great truth given from
above,

above, to the earliest and following ages, for some confirmation of what reason suggested, God hath made it fully known to us christians, that *he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained**: a day of wrath and revelation of his righteous judgement; when he will render to every man according to his deeds: to them that obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doth evil†. So that now, to use the words of Job, *hell is naked, and destruction hath no covering‡*.

Here then is a consideration, before which all that can be said or imagined in favour of sin vanishes at once. And were it constantly as productive of pleasure and profit and esteem in the world, and as consistent with peace in our own breasts, as it usually is the contrary, yet would not a moment's deliberation be necessary in order to renounce it. For what God will punish, never let man hope to be happy in.

The very apprehension of his punishing, the *fearful looking for of judgement and fiery indignation§*, which no one, who believes in God and disobeys him, can possibly avoid long together, is enough to sour the very sweetest of unlawful enjoyments, and in the midst of mirth to sink the heart with heaviness. Let every sinner consult his own heart, if it be not. Or how little soever he may feel or dread this at present, yet no one can tell, how soon and how deep *the arrows of the Almighty* may be fixed *within him*, *the poison of them drink up his spirit*, and *the terrors of God set themselves in array against him||*. Or could he go on speaking peace to himself through life, yet the approach of death may rouse him on a sudden from this dream, and crowd such horrors into the small remainder of his days, as will far exceed the longest enjoyments of past sin; horrors accompanied with the insupportable aggravation, that so far as man can judge, they seize him too late to do good.

But what avails it, if the wicked could escape the previous fears of judgement, since they cannot escape the judgement itself? *For behold the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven,*
and

* Acts xvii. 31.

† Rom. ii. 5, 6, 8, 9.

‡ Job xxvi. 6.

§ Heb. x. 27.

|| Job vi. 4.

and all that do wickedly shall be stubble; and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts.* As to the particulars of this punishment, curiosity is by no means the disposition it was intended to raise: and for the degree and duration of it, we are incompetent and partial judges of our own deserts, even in our most serious hours; and much less are we qualified in the seasons of thoughtless gaiety and bold self-confidence. God alone knows what is just and requisite: and from his declarations we must learn our fate: whose threatnings are in all respects as alarming as words can describe; and we may assure ourselves they will not be found vain terrors. Undoubtedly the sufferings of men will be as different hereafter, as their guilt is here. But whosoever shall sin presumptuously in hopes of a light punishment, will by that very punishment merit a heavy one. And who is able to conceive, to what the lowest degree may amount, of the misery that will then proceed, from the final and exemplary vengeance of omnipotence on impenitent offenders, from the bitter reflections of their own consciences on their folly and vileness, in first disobeying God, injuring their fellow-creatures, perverting themselves, then refusing the reconciliation which their Creator offered them, their Redeemer died to obtain for them, their Sanctifier was ready to apply to them; and lastly from the absence of all comfort and all hope in those regions, *where their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched†?* For such are the dwellings of the wicked; and this is the place of him, *that knoweth not God‡.* Can thy heart endure, or can thy hands be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee? *I the Lord have spoken it, and will do it§.*

The subject is much too dreadful to be enlarged on farther: and it would ill become, did not the ministry committed to us require it, one sinner to denounce against another, terrors like these. Far be it from us to *make the heart of the righteous sad, whom God hath not made sad||*; or affright the penitent, humble, vigilant believer with *devouring fire and everlasting burnings¶*; instead of teaching them to rejoice and triumph, that *there is no condemnation to them, who are in Christ Jesus**.* But whatever wilful or habitual transgressor, whatever person hitherto

* Mal. iv. 1. † Isa. lxvi. 24. Mark ix. 44, 46, 48. ‡ Job xviii. 21.

§ Ezek. xxii. 14. ¶ Ezek. xiii. 22. ¶ Isa. xxxiii. 14. ** Rom. viii. 1.

hitherto indifferent or inattentive to the state of his soul, at any time hears us, to him we must say, if there be any conviction of your danger awakened in your breast, do not suppress it, do not run away from it, do not suffer company, amusement or business to wear it off: but go, and in secret bewail yourself before God, earnestly beg pardon and grace for the merits of your crucified Redeemer, throw yourself entirely on the mercy freely offered in his name, firmly resolve, in confidence of his strength, not your own, against all sin, all imprudence, all negligence for the future; and recollect every day of your lives that solemn admonition: *Be not deceived: God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption: but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting**.

* Gal. vi. 7, 8.

S E R M O N LXXIII.

ARDENT DUTIES OF OBTAINING PIETY AND VIRTUE, EVER
FAVOUR'D BY THE ALMIGHTY.

MATTH. v. 6.

*Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness:
for they shall be filled.*

W HATEVER objections the vain or vicious make against religion, they must allow, if they have any regard to truth remaining, not only that nothing else promises happiness hereafter, but that nothing is so likely to give happiness even here, as that disposition of mind, to which religion proposes to bring us. For he, who loves God sincerely, and obeys him willingly, and trusts in him cheerfully; who delights in doing justice and shewing goodness to his fellow-creatures; and takes pleasure in regulating his conduct by the dictates of reason and scripture; studying to be useful in his station, and keeping his heart shut against every hurtful indulgence, while he opens it in a proper degree to every innocent gratification, hath unquestionably the truest enjoyment of his being, that is possible. He destroys not his health by intemperance, nor his fortune by extravagance, nor his character by criminal or mean behaviour. He generally obtains esteem and friendship from others; and he always feels the most comfortable testimony of his own conscience. Whatever he denies himself, or parts with, it is for a valuable consideration, the discharge of his duty: whatever he suffers, he escapes the greatest of evils, remorse and shame: and he enjoys the greatest good, a conscious sense of the divine favour, conducting him graciously through the afflictions of this life to an endless felicity in the next, that shall be the more abundant for them; and where shall we find
upon

upon earth a securer, an easier, a more joyful situation? right actions, it must be owned, are often accompanied, in the beginning of a christian course, with great inward struggles. But they diminish continually, in proportion as a right temper is formed: and when we arrive at a proper maturity in goodness, we shall be intirely free from difficulties, and absolutely at peace.

But then it is objected, that allowing such a state to be ever so happy, we have no prospect of attaining it in a sufficient measure to afford us any feeling of that happiness. And experience is imagined by too many to confirm this apprehension. Most of those who live either in vice or neglect of piety, make at one time or other warm resolutions, and, it may be, vigorous attempts, to throw off wrong habits and become religious. But they find it an unpleasing, laborious, painful work. And let them endeavour as earnestly as they will; nay, be ever so much persuaded for a while, that they have gained considerable ground; they are very liable to relapse, more or less, into their former transgressions or omissions, contrary to all their hopes. Daunted at this, they draw immediately a hasty conclusion, that nature is not to be altered, and custom is second nature: that it would be well for them indeed, if they had that command of themselves, that some have: but how much soever they may envy them, they must of force be content with their own condition; for it signifies nothing to strive against what they shall never get the mastery of, or aspire to what they shall never arrive at. And so they sit down satisfied with this plea, lay aside the thought of growing better, and then of course grow continually worse. Yet plainly, if endeavouring would prevent that only, it would be worth while: for, next to being good, being as little bad as we can, is our evident interest, with respect to both worlds.

But we may justly hope for much more. And that we may not doubt of it, our Saviour hath assured us of it. In the very beginning of his sermon on the mount, he lays it down: *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled.* Whoever truly desires to become pious and virtuous, and pursues that great point in the right method, with due perseverance, shall never fail of attaining his end. And the whole word of God teaches the same thing. Why then should we not believe it, and act on that belief? if we act without it indeed; our attempts will be as faint as our hopes.

But *this is the victory, that overcometh the world, even our faith* *. Not a presumptuous faith in ourselves alone : that will certainly deceive us ; and is the very cause, that so many fall to their utter ruin, when they thought they stood firmest : but a trust and reliance on the promised grace of God, through him who died to obtain for us power, as well as pardon ; a fixed persuasion, that *we can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us* : which he doth by a double assurance, of present help, as well as a future reward. This help he hath expressly engaged to every christian, in every difficulty, on the reasonable terms, of humbly praying for it, and honestly making use of it. What should hinder us then from *working out our own salvation*, when God is ready to *work in us both to will and to do* † ; both good desires, and the accomplishment of them ? Our bad inclinations may be too hard for us, but not for him. He will certainly qualify us for what he commands and expects : else his precepts would be mockery, and his punishments cruelty.

But still it is alledged by many, that in fact, though they do both endeavour and pray, they cannot become good, even in their outward behaviour ; much less in their hearts. And perfectly good we do not say they can become at present : but why not sufficiently to enjoy from it much peace and comfort ? Let us examine the pretended impossibility of this a little more distinctly. It is confessed, our spiritual frame is weak, and was grievously disordered by the fall. But however, though *in our flesh*, to use the words of the apostle, *dwelleth no good thing*, yet *after the inward man we delight in the law of God* ‡. Through his mercy we have still right and worthy principles, as well as wrong and bad ones. We have still dispositions in our breasts, to esteem and honour goodness, to be grateful for benefits, to observe the commands and submit to the disposal of a just, wise, and kind superior. Now these, directed to their properest object, Almighty God, are love, obedience and resignation to him, in which consists a spirit of religion. We have also by nature, not only tender affections in the nearer relations of life, but a general sense and approbation of honesty and truth, of good-will, pity, and forgiveness towards all with whom we have to do : and these things comprehend our duty to our neighbour.

* 1 John v. 4.

† Phil. ii. 12, 13.

‡ Rom. vii. 18, 22.

neighbour. Then, as to what we owe to ourselves : reasonable creatures must think reason ought to be followed, rather than passion and appetite ; must condemn the excesses, that destroy their understanding or health ; and be shocked at violations of decency and modesty. So that in truth, we have the seeds within us of every thing good, as well as evil. And all we need is, to cultivate the one, and pluck up the other, and we are what we should be. It is acknowledged, we have not strength of our own to root out our vices ; and our virtues will never bear fruit, without kindly influences from above. But since God is ready to give us all we really want, we may labour with full as much assurance of succeeding, as if we had it of our own.

There are instances but too many, of persons bringing themselves into habits contrary to reason and nature : why should it be impossible to acquire such, as agree with both ? We can abstain from faults, for which we have ever so great a love, when our interest requires it, when some favourite pursuit or fancy is served by it. This cannot therefore, in general, be extremely difficult : for very often the motive of such self-denial is trifling enough. And why do we then persuade ourselves, that love of God and our duty, and hope of eternal happiness, and fear of eternal misery, cannot have an equal influence upon us ? The truth is, we need but try heartily, and we shall find it can ; shall find that we are able by a firm resolution, founded on faith in heaven, to abstain from any one sinful action whatever : and therefore, by repeating the resolution, from any number of such actions.

Indeed, merely restraining the outward acts of vice, is not being virtuous : Virtue consists in the inward disposition of the heart. But a course of such restraints uniformly carried on with that view, will as certainly, in time, change our dispositions in this respect, as we see it doth in all others. We grow contented, and pleased, by degrees, with every place, and every way of life, we are put into : and become fond at last, of what we were once quite indifferent about ; nay, of what we disliked very much. But besides the general force of custom, there is a peculiar complacency, connected by our Maker with the performance of our duty ; which the longest habit of sin, cannot so entirely extinguish, but that, whenever we return to the right way, our heart will applaud us for every step we take ;

joyful prospects will open to us, and invite us on through every difficulty; till at length we shall get beyond them, and find *the ways of wisdom pleasantness; and all her paths, peace* *.

Perhaps this may not be so soon, as we could wish or expect. Yet, not uncommonly, God meets the very first advances, that he hath inclined men to make towards him, and changes their hearts almost totally at once. But be it ever so long, what have we else to do, but go on and wait his time? Attaining a religious state of mind is not a matter, at which one would aim only, if it could be acquired in a short space, and with little trouble. It is the great, the one thing that we have to be concerned about in life: what must be done, or we are miserable; and if once done well, makes us happy for ever. Therefore, how slow or how difficult our progress may be, is little to the purpose: we should go on with more pleasure indeed, if we went on faster and smoother: but our business is to go on as we can. And whoever hath strength enough to make a stand, may quickly have enough to gain ground; and, by pursuing his advantage, will undoubtedly at length gain a complete victory.

I am very sensible, how often this fails to be the case. But the reason is: either men do not set about reforming themselves with the sincerity, the spirit and the prudence, that they do about other points of importance; or they have not patience to persist in it.

Most people, far from wishing to mend their faults, are very unwilling to know that they have any. Now what can be the meaning of this? In all other employments, whoever is desirous to do well, examines carefully into the defects of his own work, receives with thankfulness the judgement of his friends, turns to use even the censures of his enemies; and from whencesoever the knowledge of any imperfection comes, hath no quiet, till he hath corrected it to the best of his power. But is it thus we acted in the government of our hearts, and the conduct of our lives? If not, whence comes the difference? Doubtless from hence, that we are not so sincere in one case, as the other. It is not *righteousness*, piety, and virtue, that we *hunger and thirst after*; but a fair show, even though it be a false one, to others and ourselves. We have small regard to
what

* Prov. iii. 17.

what promotes not this: and what lessens it, we consider only as an injury and a loss; not at all as an opportunity given us of reforming and improving our hearts and lives, notwithstanding that we profess the strongest desire of it.

But suppose a person ever so desirous to conquer some vices, yet if he indulge others; or suppose he endeavours to get rid of all immoralities, yet if he allow himself in profaneness or forgetfulness of God, his aim is inconsistent, and he must not hope to succeed. Every virtue is connected with every other virtue: all virtue is connected with religion: and they will not flourish apart. Specious appearances there may be: but not useful realities. We must *hunger and thirst after universal righteousness*, not one part only, if we expect to be filled from above.

Nay though we should wish to grow better in all respects, yet wishing it faintly, and attending to it slightly, will never effect it. If we make riches, or power, or pleasure, or any thing else of this world, our great aim; and look upon the religious and moral government of ourselves as an inferior matter; not to be overlooked indeed, but requiring only so much regard, as these more important affairs will admit; our improvement in it will be very little, if any at all: *For we cannot serve two masters**: But did we once see, and will keep in mind, that piety and virtue are our business here; that forming our hearts to a practical esteem of reason and truth, to a temper of justice and goodness towards men, of reverence and obedience to God, of love to Christ, of joy in the Holy Ghost, is our main concern, compared with which every thing else is nothing: it would make a wonderful difference, both in our diligence and our success.

But still, the greatest diligence may fail, unless we proceed in a proper method. If we resolve against sin; and will not resolve to be on our guard against the things, that lead us into it: If we desire to *grow in grace*†; and will not use the means, which God hath appointed for our growth in it: what wonder is it, that we fail? Nay, though we take the rightest methods imaginable, and proceed in them, for a time, with the greatest spirit: yet if, after a while, we become *wearied, and faint*

* Matth. vi. 24.

† 2 Pet. iii. 18.

*faint in our minds**, and leave off; all our past labour will be in vain. We cannot indeed keep to the same pitch constantly: but whenever the want of it hath betrayed us into a fault, we can recover and raise ourselves up to it again. And though a fresh repetition of the same fault were to succeed often; yet, recollection and fresh resolution may be repeated as often, till through the grace of God they become effectual.

But here people usually object; they cannot resolve against sin more strongly, than they have done; yet their former resolutions have stood them in no stead: and to what purpose is it to make more! Now every one sees, how absurd this way of thinking would be in the affairs of common life. Scarce any one succeeds at the first trial, usually not till after many trials, in almost any thing they go about to learn. And yet what do they do? They endeavour on: and though perhaps they cannot possibly be more in earnest at last, than they were at first, yet insensibly, themselves know not how, they overcome the difficulty so intirely, that very often neither any feeling, nor any notion of it remains.

Let us therefore imitate their perseverance; and not be impatient, and out of hopes, because of a few failures: always think lowly of what we have done; but always highly of what through God's help, we may do. Being uneasy at our past miscarriages, is indeed a duty, so far as it teaches us to be humble, to ask pardon, and strive to behave better. But if we do nothing but dwell upon and aggravate our fault to our own minds; till we have so little opinion of, and so little liking to, ourselves, that we have no heart to set about amendment; a sensibility, thus excessive, defeats its own end; and becomes a new sin, added to all the former. We must therefore never despair, and give up our case as incurable, and our souls as lost; for they are not so. God is our physician; and no disease is too inveterate for him. We have only to study and follow his directions faithfully, and the final event is infallible. If we fail in our duty; we may, if we will, from that very failure get more strength and skill for the future: by observing, through what wrongness or weakness in our temper, what rashness or negligence in our conduct, the advantage against us was gained; and

* Heb. xii. 3.

and thinking, what precautions will be most effectual against another trial. A moderate share of time and pains, honestly spent thus, would give us happy earnestness of obtaining at length an intire conquest: which however, though always possible, will be much the easier and surer, the earlier we prepare for and engage in the conflict; before we give the enemy leisure to strengthen himself, by further weakening and corrupting us. *My son, gather instruction from thy youth up: so shalt thou find wisdom till thine old age. Come unto her as one that ploweth and soweth, and wait for her good fruits: for thou shalt not toil much in labouring about her, but shalt eat of her fruits right soon.—My son, if thou wilt, thou shalt be taught: and if thou apply thy mind, thou shalt be prudent.—Let thy mind be upon the ordinances of the Lord, and meditate continually in his commandments: He shall establish thine heart, and give thee wisdom at thine own desire*.*

But supposing the worst, that we have been negligent, or even grossly sinful in time past; yet not only reason and the promises of scripture, but experience proves the possibility of our recovery. Did not *David* recover from adultery and murder, *Manasseh* from idolatry, *Zaccheus* the publican from covetousness and injustice, *Peter* from denying Christ, *Paul* from blaspheming and persecuting? Have not multitudes in all ages, many in our own, some perhaps known to us, recovered from the vilest acts, from the longest habits of sin? Why then cannot we do what they have done?

It must be confessed indeed, that some have naturally dispositions much more favourable both to innocence and repentance, than others. But God hath made none of his creatures incapable of what he made them for. And since he condescends to help us, we may be sure he will help us as much as we really want. The weakness of man, the force of temptation, the difficulty of duty, are of small account, where the Almighty is ready to interpose. Our own strength indeed cannot increase, in proportion as our trials do: but that, which proceeds from him, can. And this is the great felicity of our dependance upon him, that while our sense of continually needing his aid is fitted, beyond all things, to keep us humble: our assurance of having it, if we will ask and use it, gives us a comfort and a spirit, that nothing else can equal.

God

* *Ecclus vi. 18, 19, 32, 37.*

God will certainly enable us to do every thing which is necessary to be done. And though he may possibly suffer us to strive against some of our smaller faults, much longer and more ineffectually, than we could wish; yet we may be assured, he hath wise and good reasons for exercising us with such difficulties; and provided we continue *the good fight* with patience and courage, whatever labour and pain it may cause us now, it shall not hinder, but increase our reward hereafter: and the prospect of that is abundantly sufficient to make us happy in the meanwhile. No that we can ever fit ourselves to appear before God, and be justified in his sight, on the footing of a covenant of works. Far be from us the haughty imagination. We desire to be accepted, not for what we have done, but for what our blessed Redeemer hath done on our account: *and to be found in him, not having our own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith**. After this we are to *hunger and thirst* both as the means of personal righteousness, and the ground of God's accepting it. In this alone we are to hope first, and rejoice afterwards.

Yet still, *if in this life only we had hope in Christ, we might sometimes be of all men most miserable†*. Not but that, even then, a steady course of virtue and religion would in general be evidently for the interest of mankind, and almost of every individual. But after all, there would be cases too often happening, in which the trouble of combating evil inclinations and habits would be so great, the progress in goodness so imperfect, and the enjoyment of it so precarious and short-lived; that human resolution must be supposed likely to stagger and faint, under such trials. But since we are assured of enjoying to eternity in perfection, whatever graces we have cultivated here with sincerity; the toilsomeness of the work, and the slowness of the success, ought not to deter us in the least. Let the watchfulness over our conduct, the restraint of our passions, and wrong desires, be ever so uneasy; let this uneasiness last ever so long; let our advancement, after doing our best, be mixed with ever such mortifying failures and frailties: yet, if we be faithful unto the end, every one of these seemingly discouraging circumstances will have full allowance made for it,
and

* Phil. iii. 9.

† 1 Cor. xv. 19.

and be most equitably considered to our advantage. We have only to take care of our duty; and the goodness of our Maker will be sure to take care of our happiness. Nor is it indeed, could we but think aright, of very great consequence, whether we begin to taste that happiness, in any considerable degree, during our momentary life on earth; which however truly good persons, almost, if not absolutely without exceptions, do; or whether it be reserved for that approaching time, when all they, that have *hungered and thirsted after righteousness* here, *shall be abundantly filled with the plenteousness of God's house, and made to drink of the river of his pleasures**. For with him is *fulness of joy*, and at his right hand there are pleasures for evermore†. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye *stedfast, unmovable, always bounding in the work of the Lord*: forasmuch as ye know, that your labour is not in vain in the Lord‡.

* Ps. xxxvi. 8, 9.

† Ps. xvi. 11.

‡ 1 Cor. xv. 58.

SERMON LXXIV.

THE ESSENCE OF TRUE RELIGION.

JAMES i. 27.

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this : to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

TO understand the meaning of these words fully, it must be observed, that St. *James* wrote his epistle to the *Jewish* believers in Christ; many of whom were not yet sufficiently apprized, how grievously the traditions of their elders had corrupted religion. For long-received errors are seldom entirely cast off, till some time after the truths, which, by evident consequence, prove them to be errors, are embraced. These new converts therefore, being accustomed from their infancy to think very highly of that purity of faith and worship, which was their principal distinction from the heathen world, continued even after they were christians, to give it an undue preference to the weightiest duties of common life. Their opinion of ceremonial worship indeed the gospel hath probably lowered : but it must have increased their esteem of faith. And though it was easy to understand that no faith could be valuable, unless it brought forth the good fruit of universal obedience ; yet wrong inclinations led many to mistake the matter : who accordingly contenting themselves with a speculative belief, and formal devotion, thought and spoke ill of those, who either differed from them in religious tenets, or laid any great stress on moral practice. Now had the apostles indulged imaginations and behaviour so agreeable to corrupt nature, undoubtedly they would have gained by it a much larger number of disciples. But *they had not so learned Christ**. Each, as opportunity

* Eph. iv. 20.

tunity presented itself, diligently opposed this dreadful perversion of *the doctrine according to godliness**; but none with a warmer zeal, than St. *James*: who, presiding over the christians of *Jerusalem*, must have had the most experience of it. He therefore, throughout this whole epistle, pleads earnestly for observing the moral duties, beneficence and self-government: the latter to be exercised in our words, as well as actions.

But especially in the text, he hath exalted them so high, that he may seem, and I fear hath been apprehended by some, to exclude every thing else, as unnecessary. For what occasion is there, it may be said, to concern ourselves about acts of piety, when we are plainly told by an apostle, that a good-natured, inoffensive, regular life is the whole of our duty? Now had the apostle told us this, he would have contradicted both reason and himself. If right sentiments and behaviour be requisite in some cases; they must in all. If the good qualities of our fellow-creatures deserve proportionable esteem; the infinite perfections of our Creator demand the highest possible veneration. If we owe them gratitude for their kindnesses, which they do us; we owe beyond comparison more to him, from whose bounty every object and every capacity of enjoyment is derived. If our earthly superiors are intitled to respect and submission; the King and Lord of all hath an unspeakably stronger claim, that we should pay him the profoundest homage, believe his instructions, and do his will without reserve, however notified; be absolutely resigned to his disposal, trust in his care, and live as being always in his presence. If lastly, when we have misbehaved to a man like ourselves, we are humbly to acknowledge it, and condescend to every reasonable condition of pardon; surely, when we have sinned against our heavenly Father, we are bound to the deepest self-condemnation, the most penitent confession, the readiest compliance with whatever method, he, who alone can judge of the proper one, shall prescribe for our reconciliation.

Plainly therefore a religious and christian behaviour is equally necessary with a moral one: and there can neither be religion without feeling and expressing reverence to God; nor christianity without believing the doctrines and observing the

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institutions

* 1 Tim. vi. 3.

institutions of Christ. Nor did St. *James* imagine there could. On the contrary, we find him enjoining faith and prayer, giving directions about public worship, and ascribing great efficacy to the private ministrations of the elders of the church. Nay, in the very text, far from excluding a spirit of piety, he supposes the good deeds, which he specifies, to be done with a view of appearing *pure and undefiled before God and the Father*. The persons, to whom he wrote, had no doubt, whether Christ had commanded them to be religious: but they understood not fully, wherein religion consisted. Therefore knowing that they wanted comparatively but little incitement to the speculative and devotional parts; he insists on the other duties, in which they were deficient; kindness to their brethren, and virtuous restraint of themselves. Thus he completes the scheme of christianity, in perfect harmony with that, which St. *Paul* hath elsewhere given, by adding to the obligations of a *godly* life, those of a *righteous* and *sober* one*.

To set his doctrine before you in a still clearer light, I shall proceed to shew,

I. What *visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction* implies.

II. What *keeping ourselves unspotted from the world* comprehends.

III. That these two things are principal parts of *pure and undefiled religion*.

I. What *visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction* implies.

Now, in scripture language, to *visit* any one is to take such notice of him, and treat him in such manner, as his condition requires. For, as inattention and neglect are expressed by shutting the eyes, or turning them from any one; so attention and regard, whether in order to punish or to shew favour, are denoted by opening the eyes, and turning them towards him; which, in our translation is often called *visiting*: a word originally of the same import with frequently looking upon, and contemplating. For seeing and knowing any case, in man ought to be, and in God is always, connected with acting suitably to it. *The day of his visitation* therefore, when wicked persons or nations are the subject, is the day of his vengeance†: but
that

* Tit. ii. 12.

† 1st. x. 3.

that *the Lord hath visited and redeemed his people*, is the highest expression of his love*. And in one passage of holy writ, these different senses of the word are found together in a beautiful opposition. *Thus saith the Lord God of Israel against the pastors, that feed my people : Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them : behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the Lord†.* Since therefore the proper notice, to be taken of persons in distress, is to give them all the comfort and relief, that we can : this is what *visiting* signifies in the text : as it doth also in our Saviour's future speech to those on his right hand : *I was sick, and ye visited me‡,*

To *visit* thus *the fatherless and widows* is, in common acceptation, a work, not of justice but of compassion : so that St. James differs in phrase from St. Paul ; according to whom the second great duty of religion is righteousness. But as righteousness there undoubtedly includes mercy ; which indeed is but equity to our fellow-creatures, and strict justice to God, who hath intrusted us with the care of them : so mercy here must include righteousness ; without which it cannot be real and consistent. There are indeed persons, who shew, and perhaps affect to shew, great humanity in some things, without honesty of heart in others. One sort pique themselves on their tenderness and bounty, constant or occasional, to those whom they happen to like : another, on their charity to the poor, or sympathy with the distressed, in general : a third, on their affability and obliging deportment to all the world. But still, on some occasions, they will be oppressive or fraudulent, corrupt or prejudiced, cruel or negligent. Now with men, at least with the injudicious and inconsiderate, who make up a numerous body, such partial virtue may often take. But God expects universal rightness of disposition and behaviour : and our own consciences, in every serious hour, will reproach us, if we fail in any branch. A conduct in some points beneficent, in others injurious, must of necessity be less useful to mankind than it ought : and for the most part, if not always, will be hurtful on the whole, both by its immediate effects, and the bad influence of its example.

First therefore the foundation of justice must be laid ; and then

* Luke i. 68.

† Jer. xxiii. 2.

‡ Matth. xxv. 36.

then the beatiful superstructure of mercy will stand firm : which every one to his power should be industrious in raising. For the state of the world very loudly demands, that we not only abstain from doing harm to each other, but do every kind of good, that we possibly can. St. *James* indeed hath mentioned but one, *visiting the widows and fatherless in their affliction*. But our Saviour adds more acts of compassion concerning which inquiry will be made at the last day : and though he seems to speak as if these alone would determine our final state ; yet he speaks in the same manner, of other virtues, in his sermon on the mount. And not only this, but the whole tenour of scripture proves, that every virtue must be practised ; though frequently future happiness is promised to a single one : under which, in that case, all the rest, especially of the same sort, are meant to be comprehended. For as they flow from the same principle, and are naturally connected, they are not supposed to be naturally disjoined. Thus in some places the love, in others the fear, or even the belief alone, of God, is put for the whole of religion ; just as kindness to afflicted orphans and widows is put here for the whole of benevolence.

Nor indeed was it easy, if possible, to have pitched on a more proper specimen. Virtuous actions are laudable only so far as they proceed from virtuous motives. Now some parts of kind behaviour may be intended merely to procure a return of the same : as complaisance and courtesy. Others may be artful contrivances to promote our own more important worldly interests : as the multitude of services, great and small, which men are so officious in doing their superiors. And the vanity of raising a high character may produce not a few : indeed all that lie open to public observation. But comforting and assisting the afflicted and helpless poor, is a melancholy, troublesome, expensive work : and if performed with the privacy, needfull to acquit it from the censure of ostentation, attracts but little of the world's regard, which is commonly fixed on objects widely different. This instance therefore was chosen by our apostle with the utmost prudence, to remind men, that the only genuine beneficence is that, which extends, as opportunity offers, to the least inviting cases.

Our

Our Saviour himself gave a rule of the same tendency, when, at a large feast, *he said to him, that bade him; when thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind; and thou shalt be blessed. For they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just**. His meaning was not, to forbid any of the proprieties or civilities of life: much less to enjoin a perverse affectation of contradicting them. Neither his doctrine, nor his temper, were of this turn. On the contrary, he wrought a miracle once, to enable the master of a family to entertain his guests more plentifully†. But the custom of the *Jewish* language, in comparing two things, is seemingly to prohibit that, which is only designed to be represented as the less valuable. Thus in the Old Testament God saith, *I will have mercy, and not sacrifice*‡; that is, I esteem it more than sacrifice. Here then, in the same manner, our blessed Lord means to prefer charity to the poor, before hospitality and generosity to such as need it not: and under this one example to intimate a general caution, that we should not content ourselves with the performance of the more pleasing offices of society; (because our inducements to these may be doubtful) but prove to others and our own minds, that our goodness is real and universal, by a more than ordinary care to fulfill those obligations, which we should naturally be most inclined to omit. And as these are not the same in all men: but some are aptest to fail in one expression of humanity, and some in another; we ought none of us to consider any single branch, however excellent, as if it were the whole: but each to think over the several particulars, be they of more or less moment, in which he can add to the satisfaction, or diminish the uneasiness of his fellow-creatures: that so, by exerting a benevolence, not lavished promiscuously, but proportioned with judgement, to every person within the sphere of his influence, he may, in this part of his duty, *be perfect and intire, wanting nothing*§.

Usually indeed the rich and great can do good by far the
most

Luke xiv. 12,—14.

† Hos. vi. 6. Matth. ix. 13.

‡ John ii. 1, &c.

§ James i. 4.

most effectually and extensively. But others also, by dutifulness or affection shewn in the nearer relations of life, by virtuous example, advice prudently given, seasonable assistance, deserved recommendation, faithful service, compassionate sympathy, obliging notice, innocent cheerfulness, and even common good humour, may be instruments, of much more comfort and satisfaction to all around them, than is generally imagined.

But I now proceed to show you,

II. What *keeping ourselves unspotted from the world* comprehends.

And in general it means, preserving our lives and our hearts free from those vices, to which either the natural impressions of sensible objects, or the additional force given them by prevailing custom, may expose us. Now these are of different sorts. We may learn from the world selfishness, envy, resentment. But these interfere so continually both with justice and humanity, that in effect you have been cautioned against them under the former head. We may also learn pride: a sin, which taints the mind of man beyond most things: not only renders him disagreeable and injurious, and prevents his making reparation, though sensible that he owes it; but keeps him from perceiving his faults and his follies, and tempts him to think that application even to God for pardon and assistance is beneath him. Yet with this dreadful spirit our nature is so deeply infected, and we strengthen one another so much in it by our behaviour, that it requires, both a strict search to find how far we are guilty of it, and uncommon care to root it out.

But the most prevailing defilement of the world is immoderate love of pleasure: a disposition of worse consequence, as multitudes profess not to see the harm of it. For they conceive such exceedingly high opinions of the merit of good nature, and their own share in this merit, that they are perfectly indifferent about every thing else, and violate the plainest rules of sobriety and chastity without scruple. Yet such men will appear, when the matter is examined, extremely deficient in the very point on which they rest their character. For they always grieve and afflict their friends; they frequently wrong, in various ways, those, whose happiness they

they were bound, and perhaps had engaged, principally to consult; they entice others into sin, and leave them afterwards exposed to wretchedness; they introduce dissensions and dishonour into families, they disorder and weaken human society. And the wrongness of their conduct is so evident, that they are usually forced by a variety of arts to banish reflection: that they may, if possible, be ignorant of their own guilt, or at least inattentive to it. For would they but consider at all seriously, and without palliating, what unkind and cruel things they do, what good and worthy actions their course of life obliges them to omit, and how strongly their example tends to make others perhaps worse than themselves; they could not fail to see, that whatever pretences, and sometimes plausible ones, there may be to the contrary, no two things upon earth are in reality more inconsistent, than good nature and debauchery.

Indeed great numbers will acknowledge this; who yet strenuously plead, that, provided they do nothing prejudicial to others, there can be no harm in diverting and delighting themselves to the utmost in whatever suits their fancy. But besides the prudential objections to this scheme, it ought surely to be observed, that in point of duty we are bound to live and act agreeably to the nature given us. If passions and appetites had been the whole of our inward frame, we might allowably have indulged them to the full, like the rest of our fellow-brutes. If being also blest with reason, we are taught nothing more by it, than to abstain from hurting each other; so long as we observed that caution, it could not condemn us. But we feel ourselves qualified for better and worthier occupations, than the most innocent indulgences of sense. We experience a higher order of affections, endued with a rightful authority over the rest. These it is our business to cultivate here, in order to reap the fruit of them for ever hereafter. And all attachments to worldly objects, which make us overlook the worth, and neglect the improvement of our own souls, though they were not in the least injurious to others, are improper and criminal debasements of ourselves. Be they vehement pursuits of light amusements, grosser pleasures or more refined ones; that we should live to them, and fill up our time and our thoughts with them, as multitudes commonly do, is altogether unsuitable to creatures evidently formed for attentions and impressions of another sort, rational, moral, religious. And

though our present situation upon earth subjects us to many low employments, and offers to us many low gratifications, neither of which we are to disdain, since they are appointed for us; yet we must habituate ourselves to a superiority over them, by fit exercises of self-denial; and both consider and use them, only as being subservient to nobler purposes; ever fixing our chief regard on the duties of life, the state of our own hearts, the relation which we bear to God, the spiritual and eternal bliss, for which he designs us. Else, far from being *unspotted by this world*, we shall be so immersed in it, as not to be *meet for the inheritance of the saints in light* *.

Accordingly the scripture, which, coming from him, who best knows what is good for us, ought surely to be obeyed, were it ever so implicitly, both restrains our sensual enjoyments within certain limits, and requires a great disengagement from the most allowable of earthly satisfactions and advantages, that we may have room in our breast, for purer joys. Our Lord himself hath told us; *No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon* †. And his apostles have enjoined us, *set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth* ‡. *Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father* §. That is, immoderate fondness for the pleasures of sense, unreasonable delight in beholding the increase of our wealth, haughty complacency in pre-eminence and power, are not dispositions proceeding from God, nor consistent with a spirit of true religion. We cannot indeed preserve ourselves from being solicited, perhaps from being moved and disquieted, by some or other of the temptations that surround us: but from yielding to them, through divine assistance, we may.

Nor is it necessary for this purpose, either to retire out of society, or live uncomfortably in it. The duties of our stations and several professions we must faithfully perform, as part of the service, which we owe to God, for he will accept the com-
moneft

* Col. i. 12.

† Matth. vi. 24.

‡ Col. iii. 2.

§ 1 John ii. 15, 16.

most labour as such, if it flows from that principle. The natural gratifications, which he hath provided for us, are neither unthankfully to be condemned, nor beyond reason suspected, as unsafe. And they, who run into such extremities, make religion appear uninviting to others, and lay heavier burthen on themselves, than they will be able to bear, at least without souring their tempers: a grievous fault; and in that case the less excusable, as it is of their own bringing on, by going out of their way: whereas going forward in it would have intitled them both to surer protection and easier pardon.

But still over-free indulgence is much more general, and usually more hazardous, than overstrict abstinence. And all persons, especially all who enter far into the world, should frequently and impartially examine, whether they are indeed so innocent, as they are apt to imagine; whether they are not growing vain and thoughtless, languid in their sentiments of true honour and virtue, infrequent or spiritless in their devotions, unmindful of past sins and future improvements, forgetful of their latter end. And proportionably as they discover any of these bad symptoms, they should *take most serious heed to themselves, lest their hearts be overcharged with the cares, the pursuits, the diversions, of this life; and so that day come upon them unawares* *.

Let us all therefore determine, neither to fly from such trials of our virtue, as providence hath designed to strengthen and perfect it; nor yet run or be led into such, as may probably overset it; but use the good and bear the evil of this world with moderation; and prepare for the rewards of the next with diligence.

Having thus explained the two comprehensive duties of benevolence and self-government, prescribed in the text, I come now to shew,

III. That they are principal parts of *pure and undefiled religion*.

Indeed without them there can be nothing, that deserves the name. Religion is not a system of speculative opinions, nor a ritual of forms and ceremonies: but it consists in that love to God, as a being perfectly holy in himself and good to us; and that dutifulness to him, as the author and ruler of the universe;

C c c 2

which

* Luke xxi. 34.

which engage men to seek his favour by imitating his nature and obeying his laws. If then we neither become such as he is, nor do such things as he commands, what pretence have we to call ourselves pious persons? “*We believe in him.*” And so do *the devils* *. “*We worship him.*” But utterly *in vain* †, while we continue to be, what he must for ever continue to hate; unkind to our fellow-creatures, or immoral in the conduct of ourselves. Indeed what desire can we have of the reward, which he promises, heavenly happiness; when the temper, necessary to qualify us for enjoying it, is directly contrary to that, which we indulge? But a person humane in his heart, and careful in the government of his appetites and passions cannot, ordinarily speaking, be *far from the kingdom of God* ‡. He hath no worldly motive to prejudice him against religion: but all imaginable reason to hope and believe it is true. His knowledge of what is right and fit will help to give him just conceptions of God: his esteem for it will teach him to honour God: and the sense, which he must have, of his many failures in it, will powerfully tend to make him humble and penitent, solicitous for pardon and assistance, in what manner soever bestowed; and ambitious of that blessed state, where he shall sin no more, but his weak habits of goodness will attain their maturity, and bring forth their fruit in perfection.

Thus do virtuous dispositions conduct men to religion: and in return, one main business of religion is to strengthen and improve virtuous dispositions. Doubtless the love of God is *the first and great commandment* §: but the love of our neighbour, and of inward holiness, are the principal evidences, which he requires, of our loving him ||. Doubtless he is to be most reverently worshipped; and every duty, which he hath enjoined, whether by reason or by scripture alone, most conscientiously performed: all comparisons of one sort with the other, which may contribute to depreciate either, must be carefully avoided; and the inexpressible good influence of merely christian precepts on the observance of all the rest, thankfully acknowledged. But still, moral obligations are by much the most numerous and extensive: the temptations, that we have to transgress them, are much the strongest: the good, which

* James ii. 19.

§ Matth. xxi. 38.

† Matth. xv. 9.

|| 1 John v. 3.

‡ Mark xii. 34.

which fulfilling them doth to mankind, is much the most considerable: the proof, which it gives, of our advancement in piety, is much the surest. And they are completely comprehended under the two heads, mentioned in the text, good-will to others, and due regulation of ourselves: one of which includes all the exertions of virtue; the other, all the restraints of it.

If indeed we practise ever so many of both only from regard to interest or ease, fondness of applause, fear of worldly punishment or disesteem; securing these points will be our whole recompence. If we do it from a sense of duty; that sense is very defective, whilst duty to God is felt out of the consideration. Nay, if our principal end be obedience to him, and we flatter ourselves that our obedience is meritorious or faultless; our pride will convert the pretended homage into an insult. But if we faithfully endeavour to perform every moral precept, as the law of our Creator; not trusting to our own strength, but devoutly using the appointed means for obtaining the aid of the Holy Spirit; and then with humility of heart offer up to our heavenly Father all that we do, as *our reasonable service* *; but unworthy of his acceptance, otherwise than through his mercy, promised to the mediation of our blessed Lord: this will be the fullest demonstration, and the only effectual one, that we can give of *pure religion and undefiled*. Scripture teaches it: our understandings acquiesce in it: the experience of the great day will verify it: and the ministers of the gospel are expressly required to publish the notice of it before hand. *This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly: that they, which have believed in God, may be careful to maintain good works* †.

* Rom. xii. 1.

† Tit. iii. 8.

S E R M O N LXXV.

THE FOLLY AND DANGER OF RESTING IN THE MERE
FORM OF GODLINESS.

2 T I M. iii. 5.

*Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof:
from such turn away.*

THESE words conclude a most dreadful description given by St. Paul of the state of mankind *in the last days*. Having foretold the general practice of almost every sin, that could be named, he surprisngly adds, that with all these they should retain a mighty pretence of acting from principle: *having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof*. But how unaccountable soever this may seem in speculation, it is common in fact. And we shall do well to enquire, both into the original and the extent of such behaviour. For though remarks have been made upon some instances of it with sufficient severity, little attention hath been paid to others of almost equal importance: and yet we are charged to *turn away from* all who are guilty of them, as blameable and dangerous persons.

The duty of man, though proceeding all from one source, naturally divides itself into religion and morals. Our understanding and our affections dictate to us the practice of both these: and both evidently promote our happiness. But they promote it by such exercises and restraints, as the inbred disorder of our frame makes uneasy, at the same time that it makes them necessary: and that injudicious tenderness for ourselves, to which weak minds, as well as bodies are liable, creates in us a strange aversion from entering upon a course, imagined to be still harsher than it is, though essential to our welfare. Yet avowedly, to disregard the obligations they are
under,

under, would be too bold a step for most men; who must therefore find out some middle way. And one such way, a very obvious one, is dissimulation: of which accordingly great use hath been made, to preserve a shew both of piety and virtue. But while just notions of either prevail amongst men, it will usually cost hypocrites more pains to gain credit, than would be needful to become in earnest good: and after all, they but seldom fail of being seen through by others, and yet seldomer satisfy themselves. Mere pretence therefore will not answer the purpose: there must be something that hath the look, even to our own minds, of reality; some counterfeit of our duty, substituted instead of it, which we can mistake for it. Were such mistakes involuntary, they would be guiltless: but the persons deceived in this case, choose to deceive themselves; which the vicious are both prone and able to do in a wonderful degree. Thus the voluptuous man takes up with present momentary gratifications for his real proper happiness: and the artful man looks on the cunning, that only serves a short-lived turn, as genuine wisdom.

Now in just the same manner men have contrived to set up for religion, some, one thing, some, another: all which, though exceeding various, go under the general name of superstition. And several of these corruptions might have their first rise merely from error in judgement or ignorance. But then ill design must have supported afterwards what otherwise good sense would easily have corrected: and the main cause, why men had false notions of God and his worship, was, that, as the apostle observes, *they did not like to retain the true in their knowledge* *. It may seem an objection to this, that superstitious observances are often far more burthenfome, than *our reasonable service* †. But an evil heart thinks no grievance so heavy, as the exertion of good, and the mortification of sinful dispositions: besides that, ways have been invented of lightening the other burthens, and reducing them commonly to a small matter. No wonder then, that in all ages *forms of godliness without the power* took place: and being greatly diversified, as different occasions invited, have not only stood in the room of all that affectionate reverence, which men owe to God, but have often been supposed to compensate for breaking the strongest
of

* Rom. i. 28.

† Rom. xii. 1.

of those ties, which bind them one to another. And thus to their comfort, they found themselves at liberty in a great measure, to be at once in favour with heaven, and wicked.

Yet still there was remaining in their breasts a sense of right and wrong in their behaviour towards their fellow-creatures, which the grossest perversions of religion could not quite extinguish; but it would from time to time break out, and be troublesome. They could not therefore be completely easy, till this was quieted also: which accordingly they attempted by the same method that was used in the former case; debasing, as there the natural awe of God, so here the natural approbation of virtuous conduct, into a spurious imitation of it. Good minds esteem themselves, and labour to be esteemed by others, for acting an innocent and useful, and, if need be, a self-denying part in the community of mankind. But bad ones, unwilling to purchase the applause of the world and their own so dear, dress themselves up in false jewels, formed artfully to resemble the true; are so dazzled and cheated with the blaze of these, that they overlook the inward deformities covered by them, and demand more respect from all around them, as persons of distinction and merit, than the most truly valuable man upon earth doth: for he knows his imperfections, and *who hath made him to differ* *.

Thus then the form without the power, though much oftener censured in religion, is perhaps as frequent, and as mischievous in morality. Some have corrupted the former with injurious notions of God, with absurd modes of honouring him, with schemes of being pious, consistent with living impiously. And others in like manner have corrupted the latter with chimerical imaginations, with pernicious rules of life, with vain contrivances to be men of worth, notwithstanding a conduct in many instances notoriously unworthy. And these depravations correspond entirely the one to the other. Only the substitutes for true religion, though widely different, are most, if not all of them, comprehended under the term superstition; by which name they have been plentifully exposed: and the substitutes for true morals not having been collected into a body, with a general denomination affixed to them, the abuses introduced by their means have escaped with slighter notice. The most
extensive

* 1 Cor. iv. 7.

extensive word for them perhaps is, false honour; which therefore, as I proceed, I shall commonly use in speaking of them: yet it by no means includes the whole; for false good-nature, a different thing, is perpetually cried up, to serve just the same purpose. But however impossible it may be to find an adequate expression, the fact is clear; that counterfeits of virtue, as well as piety, have been sought out, with a bad design, and too successfully.

These in some breasts, dwell together amicably: either so adapted to each other, as to join in approving the same actions; or governing by turns when they differ, and dividing life between them: in which last case, if what calls itself religion chance to be offended by any enormous piece of iniquity, some sacrifice is made to it, in acknowledgment of its superior right; and after it is thus appeased, all goes on as before, through the gay and flourishing part of mens days at least. But some persons, on the contrary, impatient after a while under the least restraints from it, throw it off entirely, and profess honour alone for the rule; on the dignity of which valuing themselves beyond measure, they not only laugh at superstition with very superior airs, but depreciate all regard to God, as no better than superstition. Now as it would be very unjust for a man of good morals to despise religion; because these two systems are not only both true, but indeed the same truth: so it is quite ridiculous for the man of mere honour to despise superstition; because these two are not only both false, but in effect the same falsehood. They both proceed, as you have seen already, from the same unfairness and inconsiderateness: and if we go on to examine their features more distinctly, we shall see the nearness of their relation still more fully: it will appear that each depraves equally a natural and good principle in the heart; that in each the depravation is brought about, by first exalting too highly some one or few things, to the disparagement of others of no less merit, and then carrying the favourite point so far, as turns it quickly into folly, and soon after into wickedness; yet all under colour of acting from the noblest motives imaginable. These things I shall endeavour to prove and apply.

That each is the depravation of an originally right principle in our hearts appears undeniably. Were not the reverence

of an invifible fuperior founded in nature, it could neither have prevailed fo univerfally, nor flood its ground fo firmly, againft all the fophiftry, with which unbelievers have attacked it, and under all that load of abfurdities, which bigots have heaped upon it. Again: were there not fomething effentially honourable and worthy, vifionary ideas of worth and honour could not have obtained and fupported themfelves amongst men. So that indeed the very abufes, which are objected to religion and virtue, will, if duly confidered, amount to proofs of them. No error can take deep root and fpread far, without affuming a likenefs to fome truth, from which it feems to fpring. And the primitive likenefs muft be a pretty ftrong one: but after a while, the likenefs of that likenefs may take its place, and by degrees all be changed into a contrary appearance! juft as by fetching a large compafs perfons may feem to walk ftraight forward, till their faces are turned the oppofite way.

The firft ftep of this progrefs is ufually fixing the thoughts and affections very intenfely upon fome one part of duty. And this, men argue, is being concerned for what they ought. But if this engage us too much, other objects, intitled to our attention, muft go without their due fhare, even were we defirous they fhould have it. But if we had rather forget them, and make amends for it by paying a double regard to what we like better, there are no degrees of neglect to which we may not thus run. Every one obferves, that in religion men fet their whole hearts on fome darling fpeculation or practice, and utterly overlook whatever elfe they pleafe. Now juft the fame thing happens in morals; and feveral of the instances coincide. As there are fome, who place their religious character in performing certain rites and keeping certain rules of outward fanctity, without the leaft concern about any fuch temper and conduct, as thofe rites and rules were defigned to exprefs and promote: fo do others put their moral character, if it may be called fuch, on little external proprieties and decencies of behaviour, which they would on no account violate, yet have no fcruple of trampling upon the moft important focial obligations; will be guilty of the greateft injuftice, but not for the world commit an incivility; and while in fome cafes they moft rigidly obferve the nicelt punctilios, will in others

others disguise the vilest perfidiousness with the meanest hypocrisy. Again: the whole piety of many lies in a vehement zeal to have such things publicly professed, as either they do not believe, or at least will not practise: and the whole virtue of others consists in extravagant talk, meant to propagate high notions of rectitude and intellectual beauty, and harmonious affections, which have scarce the least influence on them beyond words. Again: some have narrowed their christian charity almost into the single act of almsgiving to the poor, on the strength of which they will venture, not only to be uncharitable in many ways to whomsoever else they will, but possibly dishonest, intemperate, dissolute besides. And others have shrunk their boasted benevolence into a partial good-nature, arbitrarily exerted or withheld, and shewn chiefly perhaps on occasions very ill chosen; from which they claim allowance to be as inhumanly barbarous in other cases as they please, and as profane and debauched as they can. In short, men turn their pretences to morals into almost nothing, just as they do their pretences to religion: and in both they proceed, sometimes by fashion and custom, sometimes by mere inclination or humour. To some things they adhere firmly without any reason, others they slight contemptuously, though grounded on the strongest reasons. And thus, on both sides, attachment to truth and duty is gradually effaced: till, as the one sort can be very pious with as little true religion, as they think proper; so the other can be persons of honour, with a very small share of any single good quality. Indeed it is pitiable to see what wretched poor remnants of principle such men have at last to pride themselves upon, and dignify with pompous names.

Nor do both sorts agree only in this first step, of exalting some favourite article to the undue depression of others, but in the second, of carrying it to such lengths, as turn it into folly, and afterwards into wickedness.

For as superstition presses the obligation of many things further than religion requires; so doth false honour, beyond the precepts of morality: and strange refinements are adopted, by the one in the service of God, and by the other in the intercourse of common life, which neither divine nor human wisdom can possibly approve. But further: as superstition sometimes obliges men to transgress the rules of virtue; so doth false honour very frequently oblige them to transgress the rules

of religion. And indeed the superstitious man, to do him justice, though he is very apt to look down upon morality as a low attainment, yet in general doth think it one of some value: but the mere man of honour takes religion to be downright meanness; and at the same time that he will pay the most servile court to an earthly superior, thinks all expressions of duty to the Lord and King of heaven and earth much beneath him: or though inwardly he thinks otherwise, yet the cowardly fear of making an ill figure amongst his brethren drives him to the absurd bravery of daring to affront God, though it be with a guilty conscience, and an aching heart. Further: as the superstitious man holds those in contempt who observe only the common rules of piety; so doth the man of false honour those who confine themselves to the common rules of virtue. And as the extravagances of the one make religion despised, and tempt men to run into profaneness; so do the wildnesses of the other make virtue laughed at, and tempt men to run into profligacy. If superstition contradicts, and then to screen itself, undervalues reason: still the fiercest bigot, or most frantic enthusiast, cannot have less regard to reason, or more absolutely refuse to be tried by it, than the man of false honour. Nor can the former pay a more irrational worship to his deity, than the other pays, and requires that every body else should pay, to himself. Further yet: men of religion and virtue are humble and diffident, candid and mild: but devotees to the shadow of each, are always haughty and positive, suspicious and ready to take offence. And when they do take offence, the hottest zealot cannot easily be more mischievous in God's cause, than the man of honour thinks himself bound to be in his own. If the religion, that torments, and sheds blood to propagate faith, be cruel and detestable; the honour, that ravages and depopulates nations to extend glory, deserves no softer epithets. If superstition, on small pretences, enlists men into parties, bitter against one another, and hurtful to society; false honour, on grounds as inconsiderable raises factions equally pernicious; and exacts the same perseverance in adhering to, and going every length with, the side once chosen, whatever risque the whole may run by it. If superstition in some cases teaches men to stick at no wickedness, under penalty of losing God's favour; so doth false honour in others, under that of forfeiting

feiting the esteem of what is called the world. And if the former gives men hopes of escaping the anger of heaven for many known sins by zeal for some imagined duty; the latter helps them to evade the condemnation of their own hearts for many base actions, by encouraging them to pique themselves on some one point of merit, which perhaps after all hath little or no merit in it. And thus, as under the influence of superstition, all sense of true religion fades away; so doth all sense of true virtue under that of mere honour: till at last the meaning of this big word is become so little that a man shall claim, and be allowed, a title to it, with ever so few good qualities, and ever so many bad ones; provided he dares but venture his life to be revenged of those who shall ascribe to him any of the latter sort, which he doth not care to acknowledge.

The vilest superstition cannot possibly have depraved the heart more, than such honour: nor usually are its ill impressions so hard to change for better. And therefore though a state of corrupt religion be doubtless a deplorable one; yet that is still worse and more immediately bordering upon ruin, when all reverence for God being avowedly renounced, and all concern for virtue in reality extinguished, the single direction left for human behaviour, the only principle professed to keep men from being abandoned throughout, is an airy notion, which will easily assume any shape to serve any purpose, that they please; or vanish at command, when it can serve none. It should be added, that as superstition is a much wickeder thing, for corrupting religion under pretence of highly respecting it; so is false honour, for corrupting morals under the colour of refining and exalting them. And the latter corruptions are the less excusable of the two, as they can hardly in so great a degree, proceed from mistake: since the duties, that we owe one to another must be considerably more obvious to our apprehensions, than such as flow from the relations in which we stand to our heavenly Father, his Son and Holy Spirit.

Upon the whole, I hope it is evident, that these two characters are in many particulars directly alike, that where they are opposite, they have this likeness still, that one is as far removed from truth as the other: but that in the point
before

before us they perpetually agree: that is, in being specious *forms* and appearances of the two most valuable things in the world, without having *the power* and substance of either: in obscuring by this fallacious resemblance that knowledge of their duty, which by reason and revelation God hath given to men, and making *the light that is in them darkness* *.

Yet, notwithstanding all that hath been said, I must beg you to observe, that both superstition may be so spoken against as to depreciate piety; and honour so as to depreciate virtue. What many delight to repeat, as a maxim without exception, that superstition is worse than having no religion at all, may be true in some cases: just as it may in others, that false honour is worse than having no rule of conduct. But since either of these may prevail in a very small and nearly harmless degree, or in a great and pernicious one; to conclude the highest and the lowest under the same condemnation, and make him who doth no worse than load the foundation of truth with a few ungraceful superstructures, equally guilty with such as would overturn it, is either the grossest unfairness, or the most pitiable want of judgement. Religion and virtue naturally produce the happiest effects. Erroneous notions in either tend, always to weaken those effects, often to produce the contrary: and therefore it should be the constant business of wise and good men to weed them out of human minds; but with the utmost caution; *lest while the tares are gathered, the wheat also be rooted up with them*†. And they, who manifest no feeling of this danger, have either a worse intention than they own, or a zeal guided by very little prudence.

Therefore the use to be made of this discourse is, not that the enormities of superstitious men should bring piety into disgrace, or those of the votaries of false honour make true honour deemed a phantom: not that either of these defective and faulty characters should keep themselves in countenance by inveighing against the defects and faults of the other; but that both labour seriously to supply and correct their own, and so become such in deed, as they are now only in imagination. For if our Maker demand any obedience from his rational

* Matth. vi. 23.

† Matth. xiii. 29.

tional creatures, it must be paid to his whole will, however made known : and if we are under any ties of social behaviour or self-government, we are bound to whatever is just and fit. All genuine religion leads to virtue : all genuine virtue to religion : *what therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder** : but let all unite in the practice of both, as prescribed in the gospel. For there and there only they will find, (what strongly demonstrates its heavenly origin) a blameless and perfect institution of duty, without any mixture of what is wrong, or any omission of what is right. *Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift†.*

* Matth. xix. 6. Mark x. 9.

† 2 Cor. ix. 15.

SERMON LXXVI.

THE PERIOD OF CHRIST'S APPEARANCE IN THE WORLD, THE
MOST PROPER IN THE WISDOM OF GOD.

GAL. iv. 4.

When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son.

THE redemption of mankind from sin and misery by the incarnation and death of Christ was on God's part, entirely a matter of mere grace and favour. It depended wholly on his free choice, whether he would send a Saviour into the world at all: much more at what time he would. We have therefore no claim, but what is founded on his voluntary promises. These indeed, when they were given, he was bound to make good. And as some of them not only assured the world of such a person's coming, but fixed the time of it; so accordingly he came at the time fixed. It had been foretold in scripture, that he should appear under the fourth of the great empires of the world*; whilst the second house, or temple of the Jews was in being†; when *the sceptre was departing from Judah*‡; at the end of so many weeks after their return from the captivity§, each consisting, not of seven days, but of seven years. And in fact, just when all these marks were visibly united, *Jesus came into Galilee, preaching and saying, the time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God is at hand: Repent ye, and believe the gospel*||.

The fulness of time therefore, mentioned by the apostle in the text, which he calls *the appointed time of the Father* two verses

* Dan. ii. 44.

† Hag. ii. 9.

‡ Gen. xlix. 10.

§ Dan. ix. 25. 26.

|| Mark i. 14, 15.



verfes before, fo plainly that which the fcripture prophecies point out and determine. And this being kept to, as it was with great exactnefs; reasonable and confiderate men, if the world were made up of fuch only, would have little farther left to do in the matter, than to acknowledge, with due admiration, that *known unto God are all his works from the beginning**. Still, modeft inquiries may undoubtedly be made, why a bleffing of fo great importance was delayed fo long. If reafons can be found, pious minds will rejoice in them; if not, they will eafily be fatisfied, that God can fee better and farther, than his creatures.

† But the captious and the arrogant, they who muft either underftand every thing, or will believe nothing, have, it feems, infuperable difficulties on this head: and the one point of our Saviour's coming no fooner, is enough with them to deftroy his whole claim without looking farther into it. For they fay, if either his inftructions or his death, were of fuch confequence, as chriftians imagine; why was not the world bleffed with them immediately? Where was the goodnefs, where was the wifdom, of deferring till 1700 years ago, what, if it was neceffary at all, was equally neceffary long before. If their own reafon was a fufficient guide to men, there was no need of his ever coming to teach them: if it was not, he ought to have fupplied the defects of it many ages fooner.

Now to thefe objections it would be answer enough, that God having borne testimony of chriftianity, firft by prophecies evidently fulfilled, then by miracles unquestionably performed; it is a much more conclufive argument, that for thefe reafons, it certainly came from him, and therefore came at a proper time, than that, according to our notions, it did not come at a proper time, and therefore did not come from him. Of plain facts well attested, and plain conclufions drawn from them, we are

VOL. II.

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competent

* Acts xv. 18.

† *Celf.* in *Orig.* l. 6. §. 78. objects: why fo late? Why into fuch a corner? He fhould have animated many bodies, and been fent into different parts of the world. *Origen* answers, that he entered before his incarnation into all that lived well: that he muft appear in a nation owning one God, and having prophecies of his coming, and at a time when his doctrine could fpread*: that one Chrif, as one fun, was enough for the world; and if not, all chriftians are members of his body.

* On which point alfo he infifts, l. 2. §. 20. fhewing the advantage of his appearing when the world was in peace, under one great empire.

competent judges. But for creatures who have only a very imperfect acquaintance with a very small part of the world, for a very few years, to think of prescribing, by what steps the allwise God must conduct the affairs of it: and at what period he is bound to do this thing and that, if he doth it at all; is such amazing presumption, as no degree of ignorant boldness in deciding about the highest points of earthly knowledge, makes any approach to: and were it carried on to its full length, it must end in downright atheism.

For suppose a new set of objectors should arise, and argue against the creation, as these do against the redemption, of man: should ask, if a good and wise being made the world for our happiness, why he made it no sooner; why he did not make us at once as happy, as we could be; why at least the conveniences of life, the remedies for diseases, the several parts of useful and entertaining knowledge were not discovered to us immediately; why the extraordinary persons, who in various ways have enlightened and benefited the world, were sent into it so late, and not at the very first; where was the goodness, where was the wisdom, of deferring so many things till these later ages; which, if they were wanted at all, were equally wanted long before? Could any other answer be given in defence of natural religion, than hath been given just now in defence of the gospel; that God knows best the proper time of every thing. Let these objectors therefore chuse, whether they will stand by their objection, and be atheists; or give it up, and be christians.

But to supply them with some inducements to chuse right, and give you some further satisfaction in so material a point, it will be useful to consider our blessed Lord's coming,

- I. With regard to those who lived before it; and
- II. With relation to those who lived after it.

From thence it will appear, that his coming, when he did, was no hardship to the former: and an unspeakable advantage to the latter: and therefore was well and wisely appointed.

I. That his coming, when he did, was no hardship to those, who lived before it. For though his personal appearance was late, yet that doth not hinder, but the earliest ages may have been greatly the happier for it: We learn indeed from scripture, that *there is no salvation in any other**. But we learn

also,

* Acts iv. 12.

also, that the salvation, procured by him, extends from the beginning of time to the end of it: that *as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive**: that good persons in the first ages, as well as in the following, were redeemed by his blood, who being fore-ordained from eternity, to be *manifested in due time†*, is therefore, in respect of the efficacy of his death, *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world‡*. The reality of this efficacy we hope we are well able to defend, whenever that shall be the point in question. But in the mean time this is very evident, that whatever motive the view of his sufferings, when past, could offer to God for being gracious to men, the foresight of the same sufferings, covenanted for in time to come, must be an equal motive: for a good security is, to all intents, equivalent to an actual payment. And therefore the death of our Saviour, when he did die, was just as beneficial, as it possibly could have been, ever so much earlier. And as we firmly believe that it was highly beneficial to many, who trusted in God's mercy, with a very obscure knowledge of him: so we are far from denying, that it may have been beneficial to many others, who trusted in the same mercy, without any present knowledge of him at all.

We do indeed maintain, that human reason, unassisted by divine revelation, is an insufficient guide in matters of religion, But insufficient for what purpose? Not insufficient to shew the means of escaping future misery. If it were, since multitudes have never had any other guide, they must be miserable unavoidably, and God unjust in making them so. But we say it is insufficient, in its very nature, to give men that degree of knowledge and goodness, and consequently that future happiness, which the faith of Christ can give: and that it hath proved insufficient in fact, to give any one nation in the world any considerable degree of knowledge and goodness at all: nay, to preserve any one nation from being overwhelmed with gross ignorance and wickedness. That the heathen part of the world hath been thus ignorant and wicked, unbelievers themselves must acknowledge. And if it be an argument against the christian scheme, that nothing was done sooner to relieve them: how much stronger an argument is it against *their* scheme, that,

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according

* 1 Cor. xv. 22.

† Tit. i. 2, 3.

‡ Rev. xiii. 8.

according to that, nothing is yet, or ever will be, done to relieve them? We teach, that God sent his Son to reform the world, when he saw it a proper time: they teach, that he hath sent no one at any time: and which bears hardest upon his goodness and wisdom? Undoubtedly they will say, that God makes due allowances for the disadvantages men are under. Why we say the very same thing: and why is not the plea as good in our mouths, as in theirs? Much better indeed: because we think unassisted reason, could hardly, 'if at all, teach men, several truths, which they think it could not fail to teach them: and therefore, as unaffected ignorance is always an excuse for faults, unbelievers, if they will be consistent with themselves, must pass a harder sentence on the heathen world, than christians have ground to do.

But not only the generality of the world, before Christ, were possessed of this advantage on our scheme; but a considerable part of it enjoyed, what might have been, if they would, a much greater; and as they wanted supernatural instruction, so they had it. Revelations were made, as soon as ever they became needful, first to *Adam*, then to *Noah*, then to *Abraham*: each of whom doubtless communicated them to their descendants. Now the descendants of the two former were all mankind; and of the last, several great nations. Then afterwards, that astonishing delivery of the law on mount *Sinai* to the *Jews*, preceded by such miracles in *Egypt*, followed by so many more in *Canaan*, and made the foundation of a large commonwealth, professing faith in one only God, the Maker of heaven and earth, was a standing declaration of true religion first to all the countries in their neighbourhood, then to all the countries in which they were captives or dispersed, till the very time of our Saviour's appearance. The effects of these things, though much less than they might have been, were however considerable; perhaps the chief foundation of all the true religion which the Gentiles had. And how much less worthy of the divine goodness is the doctrine of unbelievers, that man was totally abandoned by his Maker to ignorance and sin; than ours, that interpositions from above in his favour were thus often vouchsafed? And how greatly do these lessen the difficulty, concerning our Saviour's coming so late; especially if we add farther, what the word of God much more than intimates,

intimates, that all the supernatural instructions which the world had from the earliest times, were given for his sake, and through his means. Nay, were we to say farther yet, that he gave personally the chief of them; and appeared many times for this purpose, before he appeared in the flesh: it would be nothing more, than scripture makes probable, and learned and judicious christians in all ages have believed.

Since therefore the world had no right at all to any revelation of God's will, and yet partook of it thus from the first; they were by no means hardly treated, in not having the fullest manifestation of it sooner. Nay, indeed, there must be something peculiarly pleasing to good men amongst the *Jews*, in that gradual increase of light, which was imparted to them, brightening on continually towards perfect day. And every pious mind, in every place, had one advantage, even from the obscurity which encompassed them; that they could exercise a more acceptable trust in the divine promises, while they were less explicit: and entitle themselves to a greater blessedness, for doing so much, while they saw in comparison so little.

Still we own, that, upon the whole, they had not equal privileges with us; and yet we hold *that God is no respecter of persons* *: that is, he never makes unjust or unreasonable distinctions: but that he makes very often such as we cannot see the reason for, is as evident in the daily course of nature and providence, as in the doctrine of revelation. It is most visible, that God withholds many blessings, conducive to virtue and piety, as well as to temporal happiness, from some persons, some nations, and some ages, which yet he bestows on others: and why then might he not withhold, from the ages before Christ, the advantages, which those after him receive from his coming, even though we could not shew, what end was answered by that method of proceeding? But indeed we can shew many valuable ones: as I shall now proceed to do, under the

Ild head proposed, which is: that his appearing so late, as it was no injury to the preceding times, was a great benefit to the following. For by that means, christianity was capable, both of being proved more clearly, and spread through the world more easily, and fixed in it more lastingly.

Had

* Acts x. 34.

Had our Saviour appeared in the early ages, there had been little or no room for a number of prophecies concerning him beforehand. Or if there had, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to prove afterwards, that such prophecies were made a sufficient time before the event. And thus one kind of evidence of his authority, and a very strong one, must have been intirely lost.

And for the other evidence, that of miracles: had Christ come and performed his, only a thousand or two of years earlier than he did; they who object now to his coming no sooner, how much more would they have objected in that case to his coming so soon; in a period of time, when men were ignorant and unexperienced, credulous and unsuspicious, and besides incapable of conveying down to us with any certainty what passed amongst them? Indeed as it is, are not some ready to say or imagine, though very unjustly, that the credit of the gospel history is less for its being so ancient; and wearing out continually, as time runs on? What would they have said then, if the time had been twice as long? Very possibly, there might have been little need for them to say any thing: almost, if not quite, every ray of truth might have been lost in the thickness of the medium, through which it was to pass; and at best the Son of God might have appeared no otherwise, than as one of the fabulous heroes of pagan antiquity. Now indeed, having a series of revelations down to his days, the latter part attesting and confirming the former, we have sufficient ground to rely firmly on the earliest. But had the whole been closed when the first was given, the proof of it must have been much weaker.

Nay, had he come in the mid-way, between those times, and that when he did: in what state would he have found the world? He would have found the *Jews*, far from being capable of so spiritual a religion as his, not sufficiently restrained by all the fetters, and all the pomp, of their own ceremonial one, from gross idolatry; and therefore plainly, as the apostle observes, in the condition of *children*, wanting to be kept longer *under tutors and governors, and the elements* of their law, till they should come to be of age for a state of freedom*. Besides, they were hitherto little known in the world; and as christianity,

* Gal. iv. 1, 2, 3.

christianity, for many reasons, was to have its rise in that nation, the proper time for its rise was certainly, not till their testimony to the prophecies and facts on which it was built, could reach farther, and have more effect.

Then as to the Gentiles, the darkness they were in, till a small time before our Saviour's appearance, was much too great for them to bear the light of the sun, breaking out upon them at once. Or had it not, they were divided into numbers of small kingdoms and states, continually at war. The communication of a religion, from one to another of these, would have been extremely difficult: and neither miracles, nor instructions, could easily have reached far. Jealousies would have arisen, that political purposes of one against another were designed to be served by it: some such perhaps would have been grafted upon it. One nation would have favoured and established the new scheme; another rejected and calumniated it: and by these contests every part of its evidence, and especially that great one, the disinterestedness of its teachers, would have become so doubtful, that many considerate men would scarce have known what to think of it.

Besides, had our blessed Lord's instructions been given much earlier; after-times would never have known sufficiently the need they had of them: but would have imagined, that, in a little while, men would have found out of themselves, every thing which he had taught them. Even now, after the experience of so many ages to the contrary, some tell us, that the whole of religion, of all we have to believe and do, to hope or fear, is so plain, that no one could ever miss it. How much more plausibly then would they have said so, and indeed how much fainter a sense should we all have had of our obligations to Christ: if the most enlightened parts of the world, had not, before his coming, wandered so long in superstition and sin?

Nor is this farther consideration without its weight: that, had our Saviour come and delivered the precepts of Christianity in their full purity and strictness, before the light of nature had been sufficiently improved, by a few of the heathens, to discern and own the justness of them: what is still said by some, would then have been said by many more: that they were utterly too rigid for the nature and circumstances of man;

man; and unfit to be required of such creatures, as we are.

But now, instead of all these inconveniences, the opposite advantages are happily obtained; only by waiting, till *the fulness of time was come*. By this prudent delay, the *Jews* were so far prepared for his reception, as they were reclaimed from idolatry: and therefore the *Mosaic* law, which had been made to keep them from it, might be safely laid aside. Some of them were grown superstitiously fond of the legal ceremonies: these it was time to enlighten. Others were longing for that better state of things, which the prophets had foretold: these it was time to bless with the consolation they waited for. The expectation, which they both had of the Messiah, would excite a great attention to the Holy Jesus: and yet the too common opinion, that he was to appear as a temporal prince, would sufficiently keep them from being partial in his favour, since he appeared in a manner so different. Their government was still in being, and their laws in use, for those, who would, to examine into: their countrymen were spread through a great part of the earth, to make the examination easier: their sacred books had been some time before translated into *Greek*, the commonest language then in the world, for every one's perusal. By these means, they and their religion were well enough known, easily to afford all needful information; yet by no means well enough liked, to prejudice men in favour of any new doctrine, that should proceed from them. Nor could men be prejudiced through them, on the side of christianity: for though they bore a considerable testimony to it, yet most part of them did it against their wills; since, though many of them believed in Christ, the generality did not.

This condition of the *Jews* undoubtedly made the *Gentiles* much better judges, of our Saviour's claim, than they could have been, had he appeared before. And as to their own condition; learning and philosophy had flourished amongst them for some ages; but was then become more universal, than ever. It had freed the minds of many from the established superstitions. It had taught a few the reasonableness of some of the strictest precepts, which our Saviour afterwards delivered. And in these respects it had very happily made way for his doctrine. But it had been far from accomplishing any general reformation,

tion, even of opinions, in the world. The heathen morality was founded on speculation, too abstracted for the bulk of mankind; was fitted rather to confound them by endless disputes, than teach them any thing solid to rest upon: indeed, to say the truth, it was never proposed to them or taught them publicly, but confined to the schools of philosophers. Nay, it had not convinced even them of many most important truths; or of the duty of professing honestly the important truths, of which they *were* convinced: for they all conformed to the established idolatries. Now these things plainly shewed, that reason alone would never make known so much of religion, as men had need to know; and therefore revelation was infinitely desirable. Yet at the same time, no age before had ever been so unlikely to embrace a false revelation, as that was. The improvement of knowledge had thoroughly enabled them to distinguish between truth and imposture; the many cheats of paganism had put them on their guard: the prevailing sect of the times was the *Epicurean*, which believed nothing of religion. And even the prevailing wickedness of the times would be sure to keep men from admitting, too hastily, a religion, so strictly virtuous, as the Christian; and indeed, to discourage any, that were cunning enough to be deceivers, from ever hoping to impose by artifice and fraud such a set of precepts on such an age. Had it been one of as great simplicity of manners, as some of the foregoing; it might have been pretended, that the goodness of the morality of the gospel had made its other doctrines pass without evidence. But to require of a generation, so extremely vicious, what had never been required of man before, an absolute denial of every wrong inclination of every kind, was a full proof of honesty in the teachers: and, if they prevailed, a strong presumption of the truth of what they taught. Now we know they did prevail. And as, without the least learning, they delivered a sublimer and purer religion; so, without the least worldly help, they produced, in a few years, a greater reformation, than all the wit and power of man had ever been able to do before: of both which arguments christianity must have been deprived, had God revealed it, before philosophy and human policy, had tried their own strength.

But further yet, when our Saviour appeared, and scarce till then, the greatest part of the known world was peaceably settled under one empire, that of the *Romans*. On which account, men were much more at leisure for attending to a new religion: travelling and sending intelligence was much more commodious: christianity therefore was easily propagated; and its proofs as easily examined. Besides this, its being persecuted so soon, and so long, through the whole of that vast dominion, shewed its professors to have no worldly interest in view: which they possibly might, if the same extent of country had still been divided amongst different princes; one of whom perhaps would have protected them against another. And their getting the better, by mere argument and patience, of this most formidable power, was a strong proof, that truth, and the God of truth, was their support. To which it must be added, that the scene of this noble struggle being at the same time the seat of learning, we have a sufficient account of it handed down to us from the first, both by friends and enemies: whereas in the more ignorant countries, where christianity was taught, (and the observation is greatly to its honour) it either could not get footing, or could not keep it; and where it lasted longest, little or no history of it remains.

These advantages then our religion had, from not being published till the age, in which it was. If any former might possibly be as proper in some respects, yet none will be found so proper in all. And if what hath been said hath only weight enough to remove an objection against the gospel, no more is necessary. But I hope it will be thought a powerful circumstance in its favour, that the time of its promulgation was so evidently the right one. And I hope also, that considerate men will take occasion from this instance to reflect, that in others too the ways of God may be very just and wise, where perhaps, on a hasty view, they may seem very exceptionable.

But I must not conclude without adding, that the care, with which our Saviour chose for our sakes the fittest season of coming, should make us very careful for our own sakes to be fit for receiving him. The whole benefit to us of what he did then, depends intirely on what we shall do at present: and all he hath gone through to help and save us, will only increase our misery, if we neglect to help ourselves, by performing, (through
the

the means which he hath procured for us) all the duties of a godly, righteous and sober life, in the constant expectation of his coming again. Permit me therefore to conclude in the apostle's words. *We then, as workers together with him, beseech you, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time: behold, now is the day of salvation *.*

* 2 Cor. vi. 1, 2.

SERMON LXXVII.

THE DANGER OF UNBELIEF, AND THE ADVANTAGES OF
RATIONAL FAITH.

JOHN XX. 29.

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they, that have not seen, and yet have believed.

THESE words relate to the strange unwillingness of one of the apostles to admit the testimony of our Saviour's resurrection. And there is something so remarkable and instructive in the account, which the evangelists give, not only of the behaviour of St. *Thomas* in the single instance before us, but of the whole behaviour of the various persons concerned in the history of our blessed Lord, and especially in the concluding part of it, that I shall desire your attention a while to that matter in general, before I proceed to our apostle's case in particular.

Throughout the gospels, the characters of all who appear in them, though very unlike each to the other, and some of them, very uncommon, are drawn so agreeably to nature, and presented so consistent; (while yet the writers plainly use no art on the occasion, and indeed were incapable of using it to any purpose) that a considerate person, without farther evidence, must conceive the descriptions to be taken from the life. Supernatural things indeed, of the most amazing kind, are intermixed. But then the cause was worthy of them in the highest degree: and all the mere human part of the narration, if I may call it by that name, is so entirely free from any thing forced and romantic, and represents the heads and hearts of men working so exactly as they do in fact work, yet so differently from what the unskilful would be apt to expect from them, that it
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very strongly confirms the truth of all that is related. I shall specify only such proofs of this point, as occur in the short story of our Saviour's death and return to life.

The picture, which we have there, of the bigotry and superstition of the *Jews*, how astonishing is it, and yet, how just! zealous professors of a religion which prefers justice and mercy to all things; yet incited by that very zeal to the grossest violations of both: abhorring from principle the *Roman* power; yet making it in form their charge against the meek and lowly Jesus, that he was dangerous to that power: determined to have his life, though visibly innocent; suborning false witnesses; raising tumults for that wicked end: yet much too scrupulous to go into the judgement-hall, lest they should be defiled, and made unfit to eat the passover. At the same time, *Pilate*, the *Roman* governor, appears in quite another light: a perfectly natural one indeed for a man of the world: but which plain country people, and such the first believers were, would never have placed him in, from their own invention. Contemptuously indifferent about the religious accusations brought against the prisoner: very clear, that the political ones were groundless, and therefore in earnest desirous to save him: but however, making a compliment of him at all adventures to *Herod*, the moment that he had hopes it might reconcile, as it did, a powerful enemy; and ready without hesitation to crucify him, rather than run the hazard of not being thought *Cæsar's* friend. His wife in the mean while, with the native tenderness of her sex, and the common superstition of the age, lays a stress on her very dreams to dissuade him from shedding guiltless blood.

The disciples, on this trying incident, we find represented to be of just such various and unequal characters, as men generally are indeed, but are seldom made to be in fictitious compositions. *Judas*, whom Christ, though he knew him well, permitted to be an apostle, (probably to shew, that the worst of men, with the fairest opportunities, could prove no evil against him) after following him to make a profit of keeping the purse, first betrays him for a little more profit; yet, like a true villain, aims to conceal his treachery under marks of most affectionate regard: is struck however with remorse and horror, when he begins to see the consequences of his crime draw nearer; but destroys himself, instead of asking pardon, because his
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own heart was too bad, to be capable of believing that his Lord could forgive him. *Peter*, on the contrary, whose forwardness and self-opinion had led him unnecessarily into the neighbourhood of danger, unable to go through the trial, which he had chosen, sinks into very wrong behaviour for a while : but having fallen merely through weakness, is recovered by a look of the person, whom he had so meanly disowned, and gives immediate proofs of the most ingenuous repentance. *John*, the beloved disciple, though driven away with the rest, (and no wonder) by their common fears, yet cannot stay with them ; goes back, the same hour, to his master at the palace of the high priest ; stands by his cross the next day, receives his dying commands, and takes his mother directly home to his own house.

The soldiers also, and the multitude, are described with the same justness and propriety. Insolent and ludicrous beyond measure at first, and for some time ; but gradually softened, and composed into seriousness, the more they saw : till at length even the heathen centurion, who presided over the execution, glorified God, saying, *certainly this was a righteous man ; truly this was the Son of God : and all the people, that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned* *. But let us proceed with the disciples.

After his death, we find them all absolutely hopeless about his resurrection : a circumstance which undoubtedly adds much weight to their subsequent conviction of it ; but which no impostor would ever have invented, because it appears so hard to reconcile with their being foretold both, as they were frequently. A fair solution indeed may be given. They thought, what others of the people said, *we have heard out of the law, that Christ abideth for ever ; and how sayest thou, the Son of Man must be lifted up* † ? Expecting therefore a victorious and immortal Messiah, they chose, when he spoke of himself, as one who was to be taken and crucified, rather to put any meaning, or none, upon the prediction of his death, and consequently of his resurrection, than to understand each in its plain meaning. But still no one would forge a fact wantonly, that must be attended with such a difficulty as this. Or, if any one had, he
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* Matth. xxvii. 54. Mark xv. 39. Luke xxiii. 47, 48 † John xii. 34.

would scarce have divided the matter so very exactly, as to represent the disciples, (which the gospels do) paying the highest honours to his dead body, though his dying extinguished all their prospects from him; and when they had left off *trusting, that this was he, who should have redeemed Israel*, yet asserting without the least doubt, that he was *a prophet, mighty in word and deed, before God and all the people**. Yet in reality, such was the very state of mind, in which persons, with their notions, must naturally be, till he rose again, supposing the scripture history of him true: which therefore receives from hence a strong confirmation.

And when he rose again, the gospel account of that event also carries the like internal marks of genuineness. Every thing is told in the most artless manner: hardly any of the most convincing circumstances dwelt upon, but merely related; and none, that may seem unfavourable to Christianity, concealed or palliated. The narration, a very lively picture of the disorder and confusion, into which the minds of the apostles must be thrown by an event so surprising, so interesting; and laid before the world, with just such omissions and trifling variations, as would happen of course in giving it to the other disciples on the spot; and as always do happen, when we inform those around us, with the greatest simplicity, of what we know best. Every single part is consistent with every other, when considered with due attention and candor. But if any were less so, a few differences in minute articles, relative to a thing done several years before, are never allowed to invalidate a perfect agreement in the main fact. On the contrary, the testimony of the apostles, instead of becoming suspicious on this account, would indeed be rather more credible: as they would plainly appear not to speak from previous combination; but each to deliver fairly what he recollected, concerning a matter, of which he was much too sure in general, to be scrupulously accurate in particulars. And the Holy Spirit, which guided them, might purposely forbear extending his influence to some things of small moment, that in after-times men might shew whether they would be reasonable, or whether they would cavil.

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* Luke xxiv 19, 21.

But one thing, more especially remarkable, the writers of the New Testament have done, which no impostors would ever have done; they have recorded the history of their own weaknesses, and those of all the apostles, just as frankly and unaffectedly, as they have done every thing else; and in no point more fully, than in the capital one of the resurrection. They acknowledge themselves, in general, to have disregarded such repeated proofs of it, as deserve the utmost regard. And, to come now closer to the proper subject of my text, one of them acquaints us, that St. *Thomas* particularly, having once fixed it in his mind, that the thing was not likely, and the evidence not sufficient; insisted, that nothing less than his own seeing and feeling the marks of the wounds should convince him that it was a reality, and not an apparition; the same person, and not another.

Now this is going a very uncommon, and it may seem an incredible, length; but there have been and are persons, on some occasions full as unreasonable, though otherwise deserving of much esteem. And we learn from a passage in St. *John*, which there is no colour for thinking was written to account for this before us, that St. *Thomas's* temper was peculiarly determined and resolute. Our Saviour, on the death of *Lazarus* in *Judea*, declares his purpose of returning thither from *Galilee*. His followers dissuade him, because he had lately been in great danger there: He persists: *then said Thomas unto his fellow-disciples, let us also go that we may die with him* *. Now the same steady firmness, when fixed on any other point, however different, would be, as we find it here, equally hard to move, And therefore his positiveness to trust no one but himself, is far from being improbable. Yet it was notwithstanding very blameworthy. For of whatsoever one man's senses can judge, another's can judge likewise: and if credible witnesses are not credited, all the affairs of human life must be at a stand.

However, this perverseness being accompanied with no bad meaning; *Thomas* having only carried somewhat further, than his companions, the diffidence, of which they had all been guilty; perhaps too thinking his master's promise, that they should see him, a good plea for holding out till he, as well as the rest had seen him; and continuing all the while in the fellowship

* John xi. 16.

lowship of the other apostles, ready to receive the proof which he demanded; our blessed Lord with perfect goodness offers it him fully. *Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing* *. This condescension immediately melted down his obstinacy, and awakened every right disposition within him: so that, far from insisting on the rigorous scrutiny, which he had before resolved to make, and was now invited to, he *answered, and said unto him*, we may partly imagine with what inward feelings, *my Lord, and my God* †. *Jesus*, in whom dignity and mildness were mixed in the most accurate proportion, spares his convert the additional confusion of a reproof: but gives him an instruction, suitable to the occasion, necessary for himself, and useful to all the world ever after; that no great virtue could be shewn merely by admitting scarcely resistible evidence, and consequently no great recompence could be expected for it: but that preserving a mind, open to embrace, and careful to seek after, such lower degrees and less obvious kinds of it, as our heavenly Father may think fit to bestow, is giving a valuable proof of upright intention, and taking a considerable step towards the attainment of distinguished happiness hereafter. *Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they, that have not seen and yet have believed.*

This declaration doth not mean, that any believers merit a blessing; which our faith no more deserves, than our good works do: but only, that faith, productive of good works, qualifies them to receive from God's free gift, that blessing, which Christ hath merited. Nor doth the former part of it, which comparatively flights the faith of St. Thomas, imply, that our Saviour's personal attendants, who had the testimony of sense for his resurrection and other miracles, were either precluded from any reward, or confined to a small one. For they had overcome very strong prejudices: and, had they manifested ever so little virtue in the speculative part of their faith; yet they might and did manifest a great deal in the practical part; by adhering to it under temptations, by professing it under persecutions, by promoting it with unwearied zeal: on which accounts a superior degree of glory was justly

VOL. II.

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promised to the apostles; notwithstanding *they believed because they had seen.*

But our concern is chiefly with the latter clause of the text: and let us consider well, what our Saviour teaches in it. Not that they are blessed, who have had no evidence, and yet have believed. In one sense indeed, of great importance, even these are blessed. They have thrown themselves, with humble minds, on God's mercy: they are directed by the wisest precepts: they enjoy the noblest hopes: a future state is not less real, for their want of skill to prove it: and whatever the ground of their faith may be; still the fruit of it, piety and moral goodness, are the true qualifications for happiness, here and hereafter. But though such persons are doubtless rewardable for the consequences of their belief, they are not so for their belief itself, considered as a mere assent of the mind. And therefore our blessed Redeemer speaks here of a different case from theirs. He came, not to require of men faith without or beyond evidence, but to lay evidence before them: and to assure them, that paying reasonable attention to it should be rewarded, and rejecting it unreasonably, punished.

Some indeed have argued, that what appears to us false, we cannot receive, what appears to us true, we cannot help receiving; and things will appear as they do: so that in belief or disbelief there can be neither praise nor blame. But, as by shutting our eyes, or turning them another way, we can exclude the sun itself from our sight, if we please: so, by refusing to attend, we may evade the force of the plainest proofs; and by attending partially, we may suffer ourselves to be overcome by the slightest objections. Much more then is it possible to judge wrong or right in matters less clear; according as we do or do not permit vicious inclination, groundless prepossession, indolence or fancy to influence our choice. And having it as truly in our power to behave well or ill in this respect, as in any other; we may be as accountable for our opinions as our actions. It is therefore no less real, and sometimes no less important, a part of our duty, to conduct our understandings well, than our affections and appetites. And further, as in the government of these last, we are to be strict in proportion as negligence would be hurtful; and less care is requisite, where little or no harm can follow: so in the use of our reasoning faculty, though we ought to avoid all errors, if we can; yet

we should be much more vigilant against errors to the disadvantage of religion and virtue, than errors in their favour; and our guilt is greater, if we are not: because the former must be pernicious, and the latter may be innocent.

But perhaps it will be said, that, whatever God intends for the rule of our faith and practice, he hath certainly made both the truth and the meaning of it so clear, that we cannot mistake about it: and therefore whatever doctrines or precepts are not so clear, need not be regarded by us. Now undoubtedly, were we to have chosen our own condition, we should have chosen it to be thus pleasing and secure. Or, were we to have guessed about it beforehand, we might have been apt to guess it would be so. But now, when we know from fact, what it is in other respects; to flatter ourselves, that in respect of religion it must needs be so perfectly agreeable to our inclinations, is palpably absurd. In every part of our conduct besides, we are liable to err fatally. How can we imagine then that there is no possible hazard in this part? The world, in which we live, was not designed for a place of safety, but of trial. And as we are tried with many difficulties in doing what is right, why may not we be tried with some in discovering it? Indeed we actually experience that we are. In multitudes of cases, great attention is requisite to find out truth: and yet great inconveniences follow, if we miss of it. We have certainly cause to hope, that the goodness of God will relieve us some way, sooner or later, from any extreme ill consequences of the mistakes, that we cannot help. But they have no title to relief, who, notwithstanding all that they see to the contrary, will be positive, that there can be no danger, and therefore needs be no care; but what they do not fully understand, and are not absolutely sure of, they may reject without hesitation. These very persons, in their temporal affairs, are strongly moved by what they apprehend but very imperfectly; believe every day upon mere probabilities, often small ones; take great notice even of possibilities; and would think and find it madness to act otherwise. Why then may not religion, considering its awful nature, deserve a reverend regard from them, though the proofs of it were less cogent, or its truths more embarrassed with difficulties, than they are? The mere suspicion, that a just and holy being rules the world, makes our case, and ought to make our behaviour, very different from what it

would be else. Every degree of evidence for it increases the difference. And the obscurest intimations, that can be given us, concerning his nature, our own condition, and what he expects from us, deserve our most serious practical notice.

Nor must it be objected, that if such things were intended to influence human life, every one would experience their influence very powerfully, which many do not. For was not reason, was not the principle of self preservation intended to influence human life? Yet are there not multitudes, who shew, and who have, comparatively, very little of either? But you will say, then our Maker doth not deal equally with us. And in one sense it is true: he doth not confer equal advantages on us. But what claim have we to them? If he may create various orders of beings, one much superior to another, as we all know he hath done; he may certainly give one part of the same order what superiority he pleases over another part. And that we should be ignorant, why he doth so, is no more a wonder, than that we are ignorant, why men are not angels, or why brutes are not men. Yet, in another sense, our Maker deals very equally by us all. He will make due allowance, both to the inward frame and outward condition of every individual; requiring only according to what he hath bestowed; which is perfectly consistent with bestowing on some far more than on others.

But it will be said, that whatever imperfection or whatever inequalities there may be from mens faculties or circumstances, in their knowledge, either of the particular doctrines and precepts, or the general obligation of natural religion; yet if God vouchsafes to superadd a revelation, one main end of that must be, to dispel the darkness, in which reason leaves us; and it must answer its end: and yet in the christian revelation many things remain as dark, as they were before. But indeed the solution of the former objection, solves the present also. If God may justly give us, at first, as low a capacity, or as little opportunity, for knowledge, as he pleases: why may he not afterwards make as small an addition to it as he pleases; and yet man be bound to receive such addition with thankfulness, and regulate his conduct by it? If but the least new discovery
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is made to us, if but the least new light is thrown on what we discerned imperfectly before, it deserves proportionable gratitude. And how much then do we owe for the many alarming and endearing truths, part of which are notified solely, and part very strongly confirmed, by the gospel of Christ!

But perhaps it will be urged, that still, besides leaving several of the doubts of reason undetermined, and its difficulties unremoved, scripture hath added several more to them, arising from its own mysterious doctrines: and instead of clearing up every thing, proposes to our belief some things impossible to be cleared up; with which otherwise we should never have been peplexed. And we own this to be fact. But then, doth not the teaching of almost any new branch of science, in the whole compass of nature, produce the same effect? Truth is infinite: our capacities finite. And the necessary consequence is, that the farther our knowledge extends, whenever we attempt to look beyond it, (which we need not) the wider we shall find the unknown region, that borders upon it on all sides, and incloses it round about. So that, if we will insist on comprehending every thing, before we believe any thing, the more is made known to us, the less we shall obtain of the satisfaction we demand.

Once more, however, it may be objected; that supposing God to favour men with a revelation, he would certainly not fail to provide, that all men might enjoy its full benefit, since they are all said to have needed it from the earliest ages: whereas christianity appeared late in the world, hath never been notified through the whole of it, nor been accompanied with equal evidence where it hath been preached. But here again: if God is not bound to give all men originally the same advantages, with regard to religion or any thing else, as he plainly doth not, how is he bound to it in what he superadds? Neither justice, nor wisdom, nor goodness, oblige him any more to the one, than the other. Yet he did manifest to fallen man immediately as much of the doctrine of redemption as he saw to be requisite: which if men lost, instead of propagating it, the fault was their own. They who were ignorant of Christ before his coming, or have been so since, may possibly have
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received much good from it ; but assuredly cannot be in a worse condition, because others know him. And there is evidently more kindness in making him known to some, than to none. All, to whom his gospel is preached, be it with more evidence or less, are, or may be, the better for it if they will. Such as firmly believe and obey it, have the highest assurance of pardon, grace and everlasting happiness. Whoever thinks it but probable, hath both a direction and a comfort, which others have not. Whoever by means of it is but strengthened in the principles of natural religion, nay whoever hath them but more frequently laid before him, may gain considerable improvement from it. For even the bare proposal of truth is often efficacious both against ignorance and error.

If still it be imagined strange, that this great remedy for our souls hath been a secret to so many for so long a time, is rejected by some who say they have examined it, and hath little or no good effect on others who profess to accept it ; consider only, what is the case of the best remedies for our bodily diseases ? Were they discovered with ease and immediately ? Are all persons now apprized of them ? Is there no room left for doubt concerning them ? Do none declare and inveigh against them ? Do they answer, in every case, every good purpose that nature intended them for ? We have but too much experience of the contrary. And yet doth all this hinder them from being valuable gifts of providence ; or justify those, who despise or neglect them ? If not, why should any one be staggered by similar objections against religion ? Nay, supposing they did lessen the certainty of it, why should he not *take heed* while he travels through the obscure and doubtful road of life, to every probability of direction from above, *as unto a light that shineth in a dark place*, however faintly it be, *until the day-dawn, and the day-star arise in his heart**.

This would be our wisdom, though the evidences, which we have for Christianity, were of the lowest kind. But what will be the folly and guilt of scorning it, if after all they should, as they do approach to the highest ! We have not indeed the immediate testimony of our senses for the resurrection of Christ, for his other miracles, and those of his apostles : but
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* 2 Pet. i. 19.

we are as sure of them, as we could have been if we had lived within a century or two of their days. For the books of the New Testament are unquestionably of no less authority now, than they were 1500 years ago. And even they, who received personally the account of these mighty works from eye-witnesses to them, had perhaps but few of them the attestation of so many concurrent witnesses, as we have, recorded in holy writ. And they could not have in the same degree (what length of time alone can give completely, and hath given us) the knowledge, that those facts, which were at first delivered to them for true, were not afterwards discovered to be false. We are certain, that christianity, far from being detected, established itself on earth, and triumphed over both *Jewish* and *Pagan* unbelief by evidence alone: that many of its prophecies are already fulfilled, and room is left, after so many ages, for the fulfilling of the rest: which last point alone will be found, on due consideration, a remarkable circumstance, and very unlikely to be accidental. Then further: as some of the arguments for it are grown stronger than they were formerly, to make amends for such as may have grown weaker; so we have others which must always continue of the same force: those, which arise from the amiableness, the dignity, the perfection of our Saviour's character; from the excellency and efficacy of his precepts; from the internal marks of genuineness and veracity in the writings of the evangelists and apostles.

Yet all this proof, we confess, amounts not to the absolutely full conviction, which they had, who *saw with their eyes, who looked upon, and their hands handled the word of life**. It is neither so obvious, but we may overlook it; nor so powerful, but, if we take pains, we may resist it. Here then we undergo a test of our fairness and integrity, which, in comparison at least, the very first christians did not. But then, you see, our gracious Master hath proportioned a blessedness to it. And besides, they and their successors underwent a much severer test, which we do not; that of dreadful worldly sufferings for the profession of the gospel. Ours is far gentler, and more eligible: only whether we will believe on evidence abundantly sufficient, though not the highest possible: whether we will *walk by faith, not by sight†*; and preserve our loyalty to

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* 1 John i. 1.

† 2 Cor. v. 7.

our Lord and our God, unshaken by the false opinions and bad customs of a thoughtless world, by the cravings of sensual appetites, and the tumults of irregular passions and fancies. This is the whole of what heaven requires of us : and if we do it but conscientiously for the short space, that we have to remain here, the trial of our faith shall be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ : whom having not seen, we have loved ; in whom, though now we see him not, yet believing we may justly rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory : assured of receiving the end of our faith, even the salvation of our souls.*

* 1 Pet. i. 7, 8, 9.

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S E R M O N LXXVIII.

ON CHRISTIAN FAITH, AND THE PUBLIC AVOWAL OF IT.

R O M. X. 10.

For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness ; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

A Considerable part of professed christians go through the world without forming to themselves any fixed rules of action at all : but in some things follow their own inclination and fancy, how often soever it varies ; in others, general custom or particular examples, with much indifference, whether they be good or bad : and so they patch up a most inconsistent life ; many of them scarce ever reflecting enough to see their inconsistencies ; and not a few absurdly imagining, that human conduct was not intended to be of a piece with itself.

Others, who do preserve uniformity of behaviour, have yet no inward principle from whence it flows, beyond reputation or private convenience. Even they who profess a high regard to morals, and in some instances appear to feel it, have too commonly no feeling at all of the strongest moral tie which can be, that which binds us to our Maker ; perhaps have never asked themselves in earnest, whether they believe in him : or, if they think they do, have no serious impressions of gratitude to the author of all good, of duty to the governor of the universe : will acknowledge, it may be, when pressed by argument, that all possible reverence is owing to him ; yet absolutely never worship him in private, and very seldom condescend even to seem to worship him in public. Whatever the hasty

reasonings of a partial heart suggest to them, they will esteem a law of God and nature. But if any thing unwelcome either to their vanity or their sensuality be offered to their belief, they will reject it instantly, as bigotry and folly, without examination. And if their way of thinking and living be but such, upon the whole, as recommends them to the indulgence of those who need the same indulgence; as to any thing further, concerning the regulation of their tempers or behaviour, the means of pardon when they have sinned, or of help to do better, there is little occasion, they apprehend, to trouble themselves.

This view of things cannot but raise compassionate and melancholy reflections in every pious breast. But what completes the unhappiness is, that while such numbers openly despise religion, great numbers more, who have no doubt of its truth, nor, when they consider, of its importance, are yet so far from being zealous for it, that they seem ashamed of it: either omitting those public evidences of their christianity, which they know they are commanded to give; or meanly excusing their observance of religious duties as weakness or compliance with custom: and seldom shewing in their common conversation near so much concern for that faith, from which they pretend to promise themselves eternal felicity, as they do for their slightest worldly interests, not to say their most trifling amusements.

The Spirit of God therefore, who clearly foresaw, that this, however strange, would be the turn of mankind, that some would think it needless to believe, and others to profess their belief, hath warned men separately against each of these errors in many places of the New Testament, and jointly against both in the text; which plainly declares, that faith in the gospel is the ground of our acceptance with God at present; and that an open acknowledgement of the gospel, in consequence of that faith, is one of the things necessary to our happiness hereafter. *For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness: and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.* :

From these words therefore I shall endeavour to explain the obligation and importance,

I. Of christian faith.

II. Of a public avowal of it.

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I. The obligation and importance of christian faith.

God, having made us reasonable creatures, may both as justly and as wisely require from us that we conduct our understandings aright, as our affections, appetites, or outward actions; the conduct of all which depends on our understandings in a great degree. If then religion be attended with appearance of evidence, enquiring into it must be our duty; and if the evidence deserves belief, unbelief must be a sin; a greater or smaller indeed, according as it arises from neglects or prejudices more or less criminal; but a sin it must be wherever the proofs are within reach. And we may not only well presume that God would make them sufficiently obvious, but on trial may perceive that he hath: adapting a great variety of them to every degree both of natural capacity and acquired knowledge, in such a manner, that no one needs be destitute, where christianity is freely taught, of light enough to convince and direct him.

Doubtless we ought to judge of unbelievers with the utmost reasonable charity. But, at the same time, both we and they should consider well our Saviour's declaration, that *if any man will do God's will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God**. For thence it follows, that they who fail of knowing his doctrine, where it is *taught as the truth is in Jesus†*, fail of it for want of doing his will. Either vicious pleasure, or worldly interests, or indolence, or resentment misleads them, which are visibly the common cases; or, let them be ever so clear of guilt in these particulars, they are influenced by the vainty of being superior to vulgar ways of thinking; the pride of not being convinced, but by just such evidence as they please to require; or the presumptuousness of opposing their own imaginations concerning the probabilities of things, (notwithstanding daily experience of their mistakes) to the express declarations of an all-knowing God. In vain do men plead their morals in other respects, while such immoralities as these have dominion over them; or their obedience to the commands of the Almighty, while they reject the great commandment of faith in his word.

But the duty of faith doth not consist merely in giving our assent to the truths of religion: a principal part of it is, to recollect them frequently, and strengthen their influence by repeated and voluntary acts of the mind. There are

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* John xii. 17.

† Eph. iv. 21.

perhaps few in proportion, who had not a sort of belief, when they thought of the matter last. But their faith hath lain asleep and forgotten, till not only their lives have been filled with such behaviour, but their minds with such notions and maxims, that it is hard to say, which prevails most in them, the christian or the infidel. Or if they remain ever so much persuaded, that religion is true; they come to look upon it, as a truth, upon which they are not to act, and scarce to think of, till they have almost done acting. And by that time, some have neglected it so long, that they go on, with great tranquillity, neglecting it to the end; while some again awake from this dream only to fall into another, that being sorry for having omitted their duty, when it is become too late to do it, is doing it sufficiently. They, whose faith lies in this manner dead in them, have in effect none at all; none of the right sort, none to any valuable purpose. And therefore the great thing incumbent on us is, to revive and exert our persuasions of divine truths; oppose them to the temptations which assault us in this bad world; and believe, not with a languid acquiescence in certain articles and precepts, when at distant times we happen to recollect them; but with a vigorous effort of all our faculties to feel their force on every occasion. For it is not with the understanding alone, but *with the whole heart*, that *man believeth unto righteousness*. Nor do we become of the number of the faithful indeed, till we are determined effectually to bear faith and true allegiance to our heavenly King, as well as are convinced of his title to our obedience: till we resolve to live to him, who, we believe, hath died for us; and bring forth the *fruits of the Spirit**, who hath planted the seeds of them in our hearts. By this rule then let us *examine ourselves*, (for it much concerns us) *whether we be really in the faith*†, or only seem so to be, deceiving our own souls.

I now proceed to shew the importance of this duty: which is fully expressed in saying, that *man believeth unto righteousness*: that is, by means of christian faith, he becomes acceptable to God, and gradually improves in all piety and virtue.

Every one of our actions derives its value from the belief or persuasion, with which it is performed. Were we to do ever

* Gal. v. 22.

† 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

so good a work, without being moved to it by a good principle, we might be more useful, but we should scarce be better, than if we had not done it at all. But when we act from conviction of an inward obligation; if it be of morals, then we act virtuously; if of religion, piously. Therefore without faith of one sort, we can do neither: and in proportion as our faith is perfect, we shall do both. A mere sense of the fitness of moral virtue is no inconsiderable antidote against many sins. But religious faith hath unspeakable advantages beyond that which is moral only. For the serious persuasion of a witness, *who seeth in secret**, of an omnipotent sovereign, equally benevolent, wise, just, and holy, must inconceivably animate to every thing good, and deter from every thing evil.

Yet still, considering our native ignorance, and the original depravity which we find within; considering also, that by repeated transgressions we fail not, more or less, to inflame our passions and appetites, darken our understandings, impair our strength, obscure the prospect of all that we could hope for, and open a dreadful one of what we may fear: the faith of natural religion alone would leave us in a great measure undirected, unassisted, un comforted; as the experience of all who have been favoured with no other guide, hath always shewn. Nay, instead of ever giving in fact the help, which from reasoning we conclude it might, it hath always, in all nations, been overwhelmed with errors, both speculative and practical. But revelation amply bestows on us every thing we want; a plain and complete law of life, a most engaging example of perfect conformity to it, pardon of sin on most equitable terms, aid from above to do our duty, and eternal happiness for a sincere, though imperfect, performance of it. How greatly we stand in need of these things, a little serious thought will make any one feel. Or if it did not, we surely must see, that God would not have offered them to man, by a method so extraordinary, as the incarnation and death of his Son, and upon the express condition of faith in him as the author of them, if there had not been strong reasons for it. And therefore whoever slights these appointed means *of God's righteousness*, must expect to stand or fall on the foot of *his own†*, without allowance; and
will

* Matth. vi. 6.

† Rom. x. 3.

will have nothing to plead hereafter against bearing the punishment of all his sins, but principally the capital and leading one, of a wilful and careless unbelief. May God incline our hearts to consider what we are, and to accept his mercy! For then, *being justified by his grace, we shall be made heirs of eternal life**; be sanctified by the Holy Ghost†, and gradually perfected in every good work to do his will‡: a state, not merely of outward regularity, but of inward purity, which our natural abilities themselves can never attain.

But in order to this amongst other duties, we must join with our faith, as the text instructs us,

II. An open avowal of it. For *with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*

There is no part of the gospel delivered in a more solemn and striking manner, than that, which three out of the four evangelists record, and one of them twice: *Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father, which is in heaven: but whosoever shall be ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels§.* It could not be a slight cause, which moved him to speak thus: and there was evidently a very great one. He came to establish on earth a public profession of true religion, for a testimony to all nations. He intended his disciples for *the light of the world*. He formed his church to be as *a city on a hill||*, to attract the eyes, and direct the steps of bewildered travellers. Concealment therefore was utterly inconsistent with his design: and all who believed in him, must acknowledge him. That persecution and death would be the consequence, he forewarned them, was to be no objection. They were neither *to forsake the assembling of themselves together¶*, nor dissemble the faith, when separate; but to *sanctify the Lord God in their hearts, and be ready to give an answer to every man that asked them an account of the hope, that was in them**.*

This then being their case, what shall we think is ours? Can it be allowed us, can we wish it were allowed us, to avoid bearing testimony to him, who *bath redeemed us to God by his*

* Tit. iii. 7.

† Rom. xv. 16.

‡ Heb. xiii. 21.

§ Matth. x. 32, 33. Mark viii. 38. Luke ix. 26. xiii. 8, 9.

|| Matth. v. 14.

¶ Heb. x. 25.

** 1 Pet. iii. 15.

*his blood**, when it will cost us only a little harmless contempt, and perhaps not even that? Or whatever we may wish, let us remember, that in his just-mentioned awful declaration, it is not being afraid, but *ashamed of him*, that he condemns: it is not the terror of a persecuting *generation*, but the scorn of a *sinful and adulterous* one, by which he cautions us not to be moved. If therefore we conceal, on account of that scorn, any part of our religious professions, we are guilty in every particular, against which his sentence is pointed: and more guilty still, if we flight it, without so much as this to excuse us; from mere indolence or humour; or because, resolving to be wicked, we will not acknowledge what binds us to be good.

But to see the obligation of this duty in a fuller light, let us consider in a distincter view the nature, the reasonableness, the usefulness of it.

We are not required to make an ostentation of our christianity; or to introduce even the mention of it to the irreligious unseasonably, but only when there is hope of doing good. None who is not well prepared in point of argument, should be desirous of entering into conversation about it with unbelievers. But especially the young and tender minded should be very cautious of engaging in so unequal a combat, as that of ingenuous modesty against the profligate boldness of the scorner and the libertine. Or if at any time they are compelled to it, they should insist on the general proofs of christianity, and not to be drawn into debates on particular difficulties, which probably they are not able to solve without help; but wave the present discussion of them, and apply for due information about them. Nay indeed, the fittest in all respects to *contend for the faith†*, should watch opportunities, not force them, lest they exasperate and harden men, instead of reclaiming them. And, be the occasion of declaring ourselves ever so proper, we should be careful not to do it with intemperate warmth; but always preserve the spirit of our religion, while we assert its honour: and express more concern for the impious and profane, than indignation at them; considering seriously the miseries, in this world and the next, which they bring upon themselves, as well as on those whom they seduce.

After

* Rev. v. 9.

† Jude ver. 3.

After guarding against these mistakes, what is the duty which remains? Only this, that without forwardness or affectation, without vehemence or bitterness, every christian avow himself, in every becoming way, to be what he is; by constantly attending the public worship of God, renewing his baptismal vow in the solemn ordinance of confirmation, stately coming to the holy table; and shewing, by the reverence of his deportment, that he doth all this as matter of conscience, not of form; by practising with simplicity and openness every other precept of his religion; and leaving no room to doubt, from what principle he acts: by *abstaining from all appearance of evil* * in his own behaviour and discourse, and approving it in that of others: by despising the contempt or hatred, which may fall upon him for such a conduct; *esteeming* as an honour *the reproach of Christ*; and *choosing rather to suffer affliction*, if he must, *with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season* †.

These are the things, comprehended in the confession, that scripture enjoins. And is any one of them unfit to be done by us, or unworthy to be required of us, or too heavy a burthen to be laid upon us? And if none be, what have we to object? We cannot be neuters between religion and irreligion: neither God nor man will understand us to be such. Our Lord himself hath made the declaration, that it is no less just, than peremptory, *be that is not with me, is against me* ‡. Which then are we? enemies or friends? Do we pronounce, by declining to appear for it, that the gospel of Christ is of no value; or, by *not being ashamed of it, that it is the power of God unto salvation* §.

But indeed, were it allowable to be of neither part openly, is it advisable? By declaring ourselves for the truth, we strengthen ourselves in it: we take up a character, which it will be our glory and our happiness that we are bound to maintain. And in all likelihood we shall thus get rid of solicitations from infidels and libertines; who will never quit us, while they find us wavering or fearful to be touched, upon the subject; but will surely, either from decency or despair, be silent, when we have notified in a prudent manner our fixed resolution. To
this

* 1 Thess. v. 22.

† Heb. xi. 25, 26.

‡ Matth. xii. 30.

§ Rom. i. 16.

this we might also, if need were, add a most equitable request; that as they set up for the great and only friends of liberty, they would tolerate us in an error, (if it can be one) which tends to make every individual virtuous, and every society flourishing; which comforts us under all afflictions here, and delights us with the hope of endless felicity hereafter: and that they would not think the belief of an ungoverned world, of unrewarded virtue and unpunished villany; of God's having left his creatures without instruction in their duty, without certainty of his pardon and grace, without assurance of their future existence and reward, so extremely meritorious a doctrine; as to entitle the maintainers of it to persecute the rest of mankind with scorn and ridicule, (the only weapons they have) till all are brought to an unity of profession in this blessed creed.

Concealing our faith may indeed secure us from being attacked upon it; but not from the dangers of licentious discourse, not from being tempted in various ways by others, not from growing indifferent and betraying ourselves into sin. Besides: whilst we keep our principles unknown, through a mean-spirited fear of bad men, we miss the esteem and friendship of the good: which may be of unspeakable use to us; perhaps in the most important respect, enabling us to *hold fast our integrity* *.

But we are to measure the value of owing our regard to religion, not only by the benefit, which we may receive from it, but the service, which we may do by it. One branch of it is, frequenting public worship. Now it is very true, that many, who stay at home, can use the same prayers, and read as good sermons in private, as they hear in the congregation. But, (besides that probably they will not if they can; and that certainly numbers, whom their practice may influence, cannot if they would;) were every single good christian to spend the whole time, which they employ in religious exercises here together, just in the same manner separately; still the mutual animating of each other, the instructive example, the awakening call to a thoughtless world, these things would be lost; the christian church, *the pillar and ground of the truth* †, would fall to ruin by quick degrees; the christian system of religion and virtue would die and be forgotten with

VOL. II.

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* Job ii. 3.

† 2 Tim. iii. 15.

the present believers in it, or even before them; excepting so much of it, as might perhaps be imperfectly preserved by methods less effectual.

It is not therefore without cause, that so great a stress is laid on attending God's holy ordinances: which whoever frequents reverently, teaches others to frequent them in the same manner; but whoever shews a contempt of them, encourages others to do so too. And the like is the case through the whole extent of piety and morals. Where our influence is the weakest, yet every one who appears in earnest on the side of God and Christ and virtue, must add some strength to the cause, and some spirit to the supporters of it. It is a common warfare, in which we are engaged. If any one be allowed to desert his station, every one must have the same allowances: and then, humanly speaking, what hinders, but all must be given up? The patrons of infidelity and libertinism, who, as one should think, have many reasons to be reserved, they declare themselves without the least scruple. Only consider therefore, if we are to be shame-faced and silent, while they are bold and boastful; how monstrous is the impropriety, and how unhappy will be the event!

But besides the general consequences of *holding fast the profession of our faith without wavering* *, or shrinking from it; let us reflect also, what particular effects it may have on our friends, our dependants, our servants, our families; on those who are united to us in the nearest relations, and whose happiness constitutes a great part of our own. All who barely know us and think well of us, will of course be in some degree, either the steadier in the faith and practice of christianity for our public adherence to it, or more unsettled for our seeming to slight it: and this one difference in our behaviour may very possibly have weight enough with more than one amongst them, to determine his conduct, and state for ever. But such as are intimate with us, will be more powerfully swayed by what they see in us. And they who live under our roof, who naturally learn almost every thing from us, who pride themselves perhaps in being like us, there is no hope that they will be religious, if they have any ground to imagine, that we are not cordially so. But taking due care to shew them that we are, will do much towards promoting their future happiness at the same

* Heb. x. 23.

same time with their own ; and indeed the present welfare too of both. For as religion furnishes the strongest motives to every part of virtue and prudence ; so, unless our example instruct those around us to perform their duty towards God, they will probably soon come to neglect it towards us, as well as towards others and themselves : whereas giving proof that we honour him, is the way to be honoured in thought, word and deed, by them ; by all the good, and even by most of the bad. Or how unequally soever esteem may be distributed now, all will be abundantly rectified in that decisive hour, when they, *that sleep in the dust of the earth, shall awake ; some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt : when they, that be wise, shall shine as the brightness of the firmament ; and they, that turn many to righteousness, as the stars, for ever and ever* *.

* Dan. xii. 2, 3.

S E R M O N LXXIX.

PRYING INTO THE SECRET THING OF GOD REPROVED.

LUKE xiii. 23, 24.

Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.

THERE is scarce any thing which proves both wisdom and rightness of mind more fully, than proper behaviour on sudden occasions, and proper answers to unforeseen questions: for what a man shews himself to be at such times, we have in general great cause to believe he really is. Now to this trial, our Saviour living a public life, in the midst of persons taking all advantages to insnare him, was perpetually exposed; and his character never suffered by it. His temper continued always composed and beneficent: his replies, when circumstances allowed it, were open and plain: at other times mixed with prudent reserve; but always tending to convert the most unfit enquiries into opportunities of communicating seasonable instruction. One instance of this, amongst many, the text affords: where we find, that as *he went through the cities and villages teaching*, some forward inquisitive man was earnest to be told, if there should be *few or many saved*. To this enquirer personally he answered nothing: but reproving his superfluous inquisitiveness by a silence, that expressed at once dignity and mildness, addressed himself to all, that were present; acquainting them what was the whole, that they needed to know and remember, in relation to that subject: in discoursing on which, I shall consider

I. The question proposed.

II. The answer given to it.

I. The

I. The question is put in very general, and seemingly inoffensive, terms: yet probably a great deal of *Jewish* pride and uncharitableness couched under it. For considering the known spirit of that people in those days, it is obvious to suspect, that this busy man's inquiry proceeded from an ill-natured hope of being confirmed in the national persuasion, that God was *not the God of the Gentiles* *; but had reserved future happiness for the *Israelites* alone. And this is the more likely, both as their own writers distinguish them by the description of a *few*, in opposition to the multitude of mankind †; and as our Saviour, in the sequel of his answer, declares that many *Gentiles*, from all parts of the earth, should be admitted into the kingdom of heaven; and many *Jews* excluded ‡.

But supposing there was no ground for imputation either of ill will or vanity; still all such questions, for this is a leading one to many others, are useless and irreverent. To be satisfied indeed, that the Lord and King of all is just and good and wise, we are essentially concerned; for, without it, we could neither honour and love him, nor enjoy any solid comfort within ourselves. And this general truth, our ideas of what infinite perfection must comprehend, and our experience of a right and kind and prudent constitution of things, unite to prove to us in a very convincing manner. Since then God is just, he will make none miserable, farther than they deserve: since he is good, he will both pardon and reward, in such degree as is fit: and since he is wise, what appears disorder and confusion to our short sight, will appear in the end perfect regularity and proportion. Had we been apprized only of thus much, we could have had no right, however desirable it might have been, to know any thing farther beforehand, even concerning ourselves; for it is enough, that we shall be treated with equity and mercy: much less could we have pleaded any shadow of right to be told, what proportion of our fellow-creatures shall behave well, and be accepted; or ill, and be punished; or why there are not more of the former, and fewer of the latter sort; or any thing of this nature. To do our duty, and trust God with the government of his own world, would be our whole concern.

Supposing

* Rom. iii. 29. and ix. 21, 22. † See 2 Esdr. viii. 1, 3. Comp. v. 15, 16.

‡ Luke xiii. 28, 29.

Supposing him then to place us in a station of much clearer light; which, thanks be to his infinite bounty, he hath done; by adding those important notifications, which we read in scripture, of what we are to believe and do, to hope and fear: it cannot be, that his voluntary communication of what he might have withheld, should authorise us to demand still more. Undoubtedly new questions, in abundance, may be asked on this new face of things: but who is intitled to ask them? And yet this is not insisted on, because they cannot be answered; for most, if not all of them, may very easily. Why are so many nations without the knowledge or belief of this important revelation? Partly, because christians have neglected to acquaint them with it, or mixed it with corruptions, or disgraced it with wickedness of life: partly, because themselves, or their ancestors, did not attend to it, when proposed, with such fairness of mind, as they ought. But what then shall become of those nations? Such among them as personally rejected the gospel, shall be punished in proportion to the wilfulness, or carelessness, that was the cause of their so doing: such as never knew it, shall be at least in no worse a condition for it, perhaps in a better. But as to christians themselves: why have so many of them perverted their religion so grievously? And why do so many of a purer profession lead most impure and sinful lives? partly, because some lay stumbling-blocks, of various kinds, in the way of their brethren: but chiefly, because others turn away their eyes from the light which they might have; or walk not suitably to that, which they actually have. And as, in all these things, there are numberless alleviations or aggravations of guilt; every man shall be treated accordingly: some *beaten with many stripes, some with few* *. But in particular, what either shall suffer, we neither are told, nor have reason to complain that we are left ignorant; since it will be our own fault, if we suffer any thing at all. *Therefore, as the second book of Esdras justly exhorts, be not thou curious, how the ungodly shall be punished: but inquire, how the righteous shall be saved* †.

But questions end not here. Supposing it mens fault, that they obey not the laws of God: why were those laws made so strict? Because a holy being could not enact any other, nor we
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* Luke xii. 47, 48.

† 2 Esdr. ix. 13.

be rais'd by any other to the spiritual happiness, which he designs for us hereafter. The only way therefore was that, which he hath taken: first to set before us a perfect rule of life; then to make every allowance, that is truly equitable, for our falling short of it. But why was our nature formed so liable to fall short of it, in the sad degree that we often do? Why, if it had not, an obedience, proportionably exacter, must have been required of us; with less hope of pardon, and heavier punishment for disobedience; as in the case of those *angels, which kept not their first estate* *. And whatever advantage it might have been, upon the whole, to inherit all the good dispositions, with which our first parents were fram'd; unallay'd with the bad ones, which they have transmitted to us; we are no more intitled to those advantages, than to the possessions, which our ancestors have forfeited, or the strong constitutions which they have destroy'd, for their posterity, as well as themselves. In some degree every created nature must be imperfect. And on many accounts, that variety of degrees, which we see in the works of God, is fit and useful. We know the reasons, in part at least, for which, beings, much lower than us, exist: why may there not then be very sufficient reasons for our being no higher, than we are? And where shall man, or angel, rest contented; if either may claim, as long as God can give? Poor as our condition is here, still it was worthy of the Almighty to place us in it; else it had not been done: for we must allow him, who could make such a world as this, to be a better judge than us, whether it was fit for him to make it, or not. And were it to continue, to its final period, the strange mixture of good and bad, which it is; yet considering the glorious recompence, that going through it well prepares us for, we shall be far from having cause to think hardly, or meanly, of providence. But we have assurance given us that the days shall come, when *the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of the Lord and his Christ* †, in a fuller sense, than they have ever been yet. And perhaps, the times already past may bear only a small proportion to that joyful future season, when religion shall be rightly understood and universally practis'd, mankind be happy, and God glorified. Blessed are they,
that

* Jude, ver. 6.

† Rev. xi. 15.

that shall live in this state of things: more blessed they, that shall contribute to it.

But, though we ought to attend, carefully and thankfully, to whatever information God gives us, yet all eagerness of knowing more than is revealed, betrays the same wrong turn with that of the inquirer in the text; who, instead of the great question, which it concerns every man to ask, and which Christ came on purpose to answer, "what he himself should do to be saved," chose to ask one, which he had no concern in, and therefore could expect no answer to, "How many should be saved." Accordingly our blessed Lord neither satisfied him, nor hath on any other occasion declared, what proportion of the human race shall be happy, and what miserable. In one or two places he seems to represent the former as the least number*: in the parable of the ten virgins he makes them equal†: in that of the servants, there is but one unfaithful‡; in that of the guests invited to supper, but one that *had not on a wedding garment*§. And yet to this *last* parable he hath added the reflection, that *many are called and few chosen*. In his own days indeed this was most literally true: and has been too much so ever since. But still St. John foresaw a time, in which one part only of true christians should be *a great multitude, that no man could number, of all kindreds and people and tongues*||: and the more ancient prophets foretel, that all nations *shall know the Lord*¶, and *all be righteous*** . Plainly then it could not be our Saviour's design, upon the whole, to determine the proportion between good and bad; but with a view of their danger, to animate all in the zealous pursuit of that recompence, which, (be the numbers of each what they would) too few obtained, whilst any failed of it: that so, as many as possible might be induced to take the right course; and God be justified, how many soever took the wrong. Therefore, as the book of *Esdra*s, already quoted, exhorts, *ask thou no more questions concerning the multitude of them that perish. For when they had taken liberty, they despised the Most High, thought scorn of his law, and forsook his ways.*—*It was not his will, that men should come to nought: but they which he created, have defiled the name of him that made them, and were unthankful*

* Matth. xx. 16.

† Matth. xxv. 1, 2.

‡ Matth. xxv. 15. &c.

§ Matth. xxii. 11.

|| Rev. vii. 9.

¶ Jer. xxxi. 34.

** Is. lx. 2.

unthankful unto him, which prepared life for them*. Justly therefore doth our Saviour in the

II. Part of the text, to which I now proceed, refuse to gratify the querist's curiosity, and return an answer intirely practical: that it was not the business of mankind to pry into what God had hid, but mind what he had revealed, and to master another kind of difficulty, that of fulfilling his commands: that multitudes indeed, who professed religion, would finally appear to have professed it in vain; but this was a matter, not to raise idle speculations upon: God would be sure to take care of his behaviour to his creatures; let them take care of their duty to him: whatever number should be saved, great or small, they knew the way, and there was but one, to become part of it; *strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.* Not that any christian shall ever do his best to enter into life, and fail of it: but that many imagine God hath marked out other ways to happiness than obeying his laws; and many too, who are fully sensible there is no other way, use so little diligence in following this, that their progress is insufficient to arrive at eternal felicity.

One fatal mistake of believers in religion hath always been, an absurd notion, that their steady faith in it, their zeal to support and spread that faith, their punctilious observance of certain forms, their constant practice of some precepts, and their periodical pretences of sorrow for having wilfully lived in the neglect of the rest; that one or other of these things would be accepted, instead of true piety and virtue. No thoroughly good heart indeed can fall into this error: but wrong inclination, joined with ignorance, or what is worse, false instruction, may give it deep root: and our Saviour, as he found it widely spread, took unwearied pains to pluck it up. Immediately after the text he declares, that neither acknowledgment of his authority, nor attendance on his teaching, nor any thing else, shall avail the *workers of iniquity*†. And in his sermon on the mount, after stating the duties of mankind in their utmost purity and strictness, he proceeds directly to urge his hearers, in words very little different from those now before us, to a careful performance of them all, however difficult, as the only

* 2 Esdr. viii. 55—60.

† Ver. 25. 26. 27.

method of attaining future bliss. *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction; and many there be which go in thereat; but strait is the gate, and narrow the way, which leadeth unto life; and few there be that find it**. All, who preach other doctrines he pronounces, in the next words, *false prophets*: all who depend on other hopes, even though they had personally followed him, and wrought miracles in his name, he utterly disowns, and assures them, they have laid their foundation on the sand. Indeed, through the whole of his ministry, he had but one rule, in relation to this matter: *If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments†*. When the twelve, whom he had chosen, came, with great satisfaction, to give him an account of the mighty works they had wrought, and the devils they had cast out, he partakes in their joy; but instantly adds; *notwithstanding, in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven‡*: because by a truly religious frame of mind, you are qualified for that place, whither *shall in no wise enter any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination; but they, which are written in the lamb's book of life||*. So perfect was his regard to truth and virtue; that no desire of gaining disciples, no tenderness to the disciples he had, could ever incline him to give any one person the least exemption from the least duty. And if such was their case, never must we indulge imaginations, that ours will be more favourable. Christianity is not an artful contrivance for conveying bad men, who will make use of it, to heaven, fraudulently; but it is *the doctrine according to godliness§*: and its advantage is, not that a christian needs not be so good a man as another, but that he hath the means of being a better: which whoever fails to be, professes it only to his condemnation. *Know ye not, saith the apostle, that they which run in a race, run all; but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain¶*. *And if a man strive for masteries; yet he is not crowned, except he strive lawfully***. Now there is one law, peculiarly necessary to be observed, if ever we would obtain a crown in the christian combat; which yet many are strangely prone to overlook, who would seem sincerely desirous to observe all the rest: I mean, an humble dependence

* Matth. vii. 13, 14.

† Matth. xix. 17.

‡ Luke x. 17.—20.

§ 1 Tim. vi. 3. ¶ 1 Cor. ix. 24. ** 2 Tim. ii. 5.

dependence on God's mercy, procured by the death of our blessed Lord; and on God's assistance, promised in return to our earnest prayers. Pardon is not a debt, but a favour; which the giver may bestow on his own terms. Our sufficiency for doing our duty, is not from ourselves, but from above; nor can we have it, unless we ask it: and were we to obey much more perfectly, than we do; it would still be no more, than what we are bound to; and even were that otherwise, eternal rewards cannot be due for temporary services. Presumption in our own strength is destructive to our virtue; confidence of our own merit is injurious to our Maker: but a deep sense of human unworthiness and of divine grace, will inspire us with that lowliness of heart which God will accept, and that vigilance of conduct which he will bless: *This therefore is the victory, that overcometh the world, even our faith**. But besides all those who through blameable mistakes thus fall into a wrong way: multitudes want courage to set out, or perseverance to continue, in what they know is the right way. For every sinful habit is to be thrown off at the entrance; every virtuous path, however rugged, pursued; every vicious one, however frequented and delightful, shunned, throughout the progress; thus *strait is the gate, and thus narrow the way that leadeth unto life*. Numbers see their duty, wish to perform it, and faintly *seek to enter in*; but not *striving* as they ought, fail in the attempt. Perhaps they even do many things well; and would do all, but for one favourite indulgence, or another, which they cannot resolve to quit: so there they stop short, and are ruined for ever. Some difficulties our very nature produces; wrong education many more; and when those of voluntary custom are added, then the opposition grows formidable indeed. But still our Saviour purposely gives full warning of it; here in general terms: but, through a good part of the next chapter, he specifies particulars; shews, how many things would render men unworthy of *eating bread in the kingdom of God†*: and as great multitudes were following him, turns and assures them, they must quit every thing that was dearest, and bear every thing that was hardest to them, when conscience required it, if they meant to be his disciples: bidding them therefore *sit down and count the cost*; consider well, how they should be able to perform what he expected,

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before

* 1 John v. 4.

† Luke xiv. 15.

before they undertook it*. Not that he intended to represent the *one thing needful*†, as a matter of indifference; that might be done or omitted, as men should have a higher or lower opinion of their own strength: but, instead of drawing after him, by false expectations, a crowd of unthinking admirers, that would first dishonour, and then perhaps forsake him; he chose to tell them the worst plainly, and at once; that, as they could not but see the importance of obeying God's will, they might see and weigh its difficulties too; and so, with deliberate and well-instructed resolution, enter upon the work; which however laborious, is indispensable.

They who have not been thus forewarned, go on indeed with great ease; but it is not in religion, that they go on. Doubtless common decency, and outward regularity, are very valuable things: would God, more attention were paid to them! But still with these there may be little true sense of duty, to God, or even man; little care, that the heart and affections be such as they ought; nay much indulgence of very criminal actions, either concealed from the world, or approved by it. In short, almost every thing may be right, in the opinion of those around us, perhaps in our own: and almost every thing wrong in the eyes of our Maker. How great is the need then, that such as are proceeding securely in the broad way, should be told the difference of that which leads unto life! But to others also, strong representations, of the purity of the divine precepts, and of the obstacles that turn men aside from the observance of them, are highly useful: they excite us to search into every branch of our conduct, every secret recess of our souls: they prevent the negligence, that betrays us into danger; and the surprize, that disconcerts and dispirits us at the appearance of it: they keep up our vigilance, put us on exerting all our own strength, and asking more from God: by which means, temptations, that else might have proved fatal, are intirely avoided, or easily overcome.

Timorous and dejected minds indeed may be hurt, by insisting too much on the trials, which they have to go through: to these therefore a different, but yet a consistent, view of things must be presented: and accordingly our Saviour, with the utmost tendernefs, invites *all, that are weary and heavy laden, to*

come

* Ver. 25—33.

† Luke x. 42.

come unto him, and they shall find rest unto their souls: his yoke shall prove easy to them, and his burthen light*: in perfect conformity to what had been prophesied of him, that he should feed his flock like a shepherd: gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom†. Religion hath both its severities and its encouragements: and the whole of both must be laid before mankind; but the one or the other dwelt on, as the case requires; that so, some may be alarmed into right conduct, others quieted in it; and neither *the heart of the righteous made sad, whom God hath not made sad*; nor *the hands of the wicked strengthened, by promising him life*‡. But undoubtedly the principal need is, of mens being awakened to a sense, that God requires much more, than is usually practised, or even thought of. For superfluous fears, though we ought carefully to guard against them, are, of the two, not near so pernicious as deceitful hopes. It is indeed a very awful consideration that the difficulties of becoming what we should be are so great and surmounted by so few. But still the truth ought not to be disguised: and the difficulty of doing what may and must be done, is no argument for any thing but unwearied diligence: and for that, it is the strongest argument in the world. That most men act wickedly, is no more an objection against religion; than that most men act unwisely, is against common prudence. That so many fail by taking a wrong course, is only a warning to make sure of taking the right. And if in that, several duties are painful, it is not christianity, that hath made them so. All its peculiar precepts are easy in themselves, and assistances to the practice of the rest. The hard sayings are declared indeed in the gospel; but enjoined by reason itself, when duly cultivated, and by the very nature of things. These, therefore, are unchangeably what they are, and all we have to do is to submit to them. But if our religion had made the duties of life stricter, it hath made the hopes of assistance and reward so much stronger, that we should have no manner of cause to complain; much less to faint. The temptations to disobey, which arise from our make and circumstances, God himself hath exposed us to; and therefore if we apply to him, will assuredly support us under, to a degree that he will accept. The ill habits which proceed from wrong education only, cannot have got very strong hold;
if

* Matth. xi. 28, 29, 30.

† Is. xl. 11.

‡ Ezek. xiii. 23.

if we begin but to extirpate them, as soon as we come to the government of ourselves. And as for those which, by our voluntary misconduct afterwards, have taken deeper root; since the mischief is of our own doing, we are bound to more pains and more patience in undoing it again. When a long irregularity hath impaired health, a long strictness of regimen will be needful to recover it: but every disease of the soul is curable at length, though many of the body are not. Indeed the severe trials are almost wholly at first; and therefore our Saviour hath peculiarly remarked, that *strait is the gate*: but when once we have contracted our appetites and passions enough, to get through that: the remaining obstacles diminish, usually by quick degrees: and after a while, the ways of wisdom become *pleasantness*; and *all her paths peace**. Then the difficulties themselves turn into delight, and the happy traveller goes on his way rejoicing; till, the days of his pilgrimage being completed, *entrance is ministered unto him abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*†.

I conclude with the words of a heathen writer; but highly deserving every christian's attention. "Think of the life of
 " man, as of a long road, leading towards a holy temple where
 " we are to be initiated in divine mysteries: a road full of
 " passengers, some loitering and trifling, some running about,
 " and hindering one another; some wandering, and losing
 " themselves. For many are the devious and deceitful paths,
 " leading to pits and precipices: but one alone, narrow and
 " steep and rough and trodden by few, that points directly for-
 " wards; which brave and induried souls, with great re-
 " solution, force their way through: earnestly longing for the
 " initiation and captivated with the beauty of the place they
 " aspire to: where when they arrive, all their labour ends,
 " and every desire is fully satisfied. Begin the journey then:
 " enter and be initiated; take possession of the good things
 " provided there: for wishes themselves can extend no far-
 " ther‡."

* Prov. iii. 17. † 2 Pet. i. 11. ‡ Max. Tyr. Diff. 23. Ed. Dav. 4to, 39.

SERMON LXXX.

THE MORTIFICATION OF IRREGULAR DESIRES AND
APPETITES, AN EVIDENCE OF A TRUE CHRISTIAN.

GAL. V. 24.

And they, that are Christ's, have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts.

THIS expression, *crucifying the flesh*, may probably seem to most, when they first hear it, or attend to it, a very strange one: as, no doubt, numbers of others in scripture do. But a little consideration will shew, that there is no cause to censure them, or be offended at them. For amidst the multiplicity of languages, that are in the world, and the various nations, tempers and circumstances, of the people who are bred up to use them; it is unavoidable, but there will be in each many ways of speaking, which though easy and familiar by custom to one part of mankind, must yet, to the rest, appear harsh and unaccountable. This is the case even of neighbouring countries in our own times: much more then must it be expected in those tongues, of which the vulgar use hath long since failed, and which formerly expressed the sentiments of distant nations, inspired both by the age and the climate they lived in, with a different turn of thought and stile. Hence proceed the surprizing warmth and boldness of figure, the abrupt transitions, the sudden lofty flights of the eastern writers and speakers, utterly contrary to the cool and regular genius of the *European* languages. And amongst the former, the compositions of the *Jews* must of course have a peculiar tincture and propriety of their own: not only because they were prohibited, for good reasons, all needless commerce with other lands; but chiefly because divine revelation delivered to them such doctrines and precepts, and consequently such terms, as the heathen had not:
which

which must likewise greatly increase in number by frequent references to their own articles of faith, observances and sacred books. When christianity was published to the world, here was again a new set of discoveries and ideas, added to the preceding: which being first communicated in Hebrew, were thence transfused into *Greek*, by the apostles addressing themselves to the Gentiles. Thus was the stile of the New-Testament produced: which being as literally translated, and closely imitated, as it well could, (for the nature of the thing required strictness) the same forms of speech have been derived down into the modern tongues of christian countries. And so it hath come to pass by a kind of necessity, that, in discourses on religion, words, meanings, constructions, images, occur, extremely remote from the common idiom of the language on other occasions. And these, weak persons are apt to mistake, artful disputants to pervert, and unlearned or unfair affecters of wit and free thought to ridicule; though originally they were of plain signification, and are still, when understood, full of good sense and beauty.

Thus, *crucifying*, or as the apostle elsewhere puts it, *mortifying* * the flesh, is a phrase far out of the road of our daily conversation, and of our reading on subjects of business and entertainment: from whence it easily happens, that the superstitious misapprehend, and the prophane despise it; though indeed it denotes a reasonable, a necessary duty, and describes that duty, not only in a strong, but elegant manner. To shew these things clearly, I shall

I. Explain to you the rise and general intention of this way of speaking.

II. Specify more distinctly the nature of the duty designed to be taught by it.

III. Shew you how strictly our belonging to Christ obliges us to practise that doctrine.

I. I shall explain to you the rise and general intention of this way of speaking in scripture.

Now the words, *flesh* and *spirit*, though employed by the writers of the New-Testament in different senses, according to the subject of which they treat, are yet commonly expressions of the moral state and character of men; the dispositions of his heart

* Col. iii. 5.

heart towards piety or sin. *Spirit* is the principle of reason and religion: *flesh* of appetite and passion. Every one feels in himself both right and wrong inclinations. The former our conscience approves. And therefore pursuing them would on that account alone be properly called, *walking after the spirit* *, that *inward man, which naturally delighteth in the law of God* †. But a much stronger ground for it is, that the divine Spirit hath not only revealed to us the whole rule of life, and the most powerful motives to observe it, but is continually present to our minds, exciting and strengthening us, if we permit him, to every good work. On the other hand, *all flesh having corrupted his way before God* ‡, sinners may be justly said to *walk after the flesh*, because they live conformably to the wicked customs of the world. But the true foundation of the phrase is, that this *corruptible body* § subjects the fallen children of *Adam* perpetually by its irregular propensities, to a variety of temptations, hard to be overcome. And therefore even heathen authors have represented it, as the principal source of moral evil: no wonder then, that those of scripture do, on fuller knowledge of the case.

But in *St. Paul* more especially the *flesh* means our vicious tendencies; not only those to sensual indulgence, but the whole system of them. Thus ver. 13. of this chapter: *brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not your liberty for an occasion to the flesh*: that is, to any blameable purpose. But the particular blameable use, which he had in view, was that of uncharitable contention. For it follows immediately, *but if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another*. Again, ver. 19. having said, that *the works of the flesh are manifest*, he proceeds to reckon amongst them, not only *adultery and lasciviousness*, but *variance, envy, strife, sedition*. And the *fruits of the spirit*, opposed to these, ver. 22. are not only *temperance*, but *long-suffering, peace, goodness, faith, or fidelity, meekness*.

Farther: because there is a connexion and sympathy between the various dispositions of the same kind, whether moral or immoral, each adding vigour and strength to the other: the several vices, to which mankind is prone, are described in *God's*

VOL. II.

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word,

* Rom. viii. 4.
§ Wisd. ix. 15.

Rom. vii. 22.

† Gen. vi. 11, 12.

word, as uniting into and forming a living body, hence denominated *the body of sin*, or of *the lusts of the flesh* * ; of which every criminal inclination is a member, thus, when the apostle had enjoined christians to *mortify their members, which are upon the earth* †, he instantly explains himself to mean the parts of this figurative body of sin, which he goes on to enumerate: *covetousness, anger, fornication, uncleanness, malice, blasphemy*.

And, in consequence of this, because not only the nature of all men is tainted originally, but the conduct of most men hath, in some respects at least, been habitually unjustifiable ; therefore the sins, which they have indulged, considered in the manner above mentioned, as united into one organized body, are also stiled in scripture, *the old man* ; in opposition to that *new man*, or blessed change of temper and behaviour, which the gospel was designed to produce. And however singular the former of these phrases may appear ; the latter, which in itself is equally so, that of becoming a new man, is both frequent in our common speech, and warranted by the politest of classical authors.

This expression therefore having taken place, the amendment of our hearts and actions is sometimes denoted by laying aside or *putting off this old man*. Thus *Eph. iv. 22. that ye put off, concerning the former conversation, the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts ; and put on the new man, which is created according to God, that is, according to the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness*. And because our gracious Redeemer was a perfect example of these, putting on the new man is elsewhere called, *putting on the Lord Jesus Christ* ‡ : a mode of speech fully vindicated by the ancient usage of the *Greek* tongue, in which the New Testament was written. For in that, *putting on any person* signified, forming ones self by his character, and imitating his manner.

At other times, this intire change of affections, will and demeanour, is expressed more strongly. We are said to *be dead to sin, and raised up again to walk in newness of life* § : which means, to be separated for ever from bad habits and customs, and enter into a different state and course, of thinking and acting ;

* Col. ii. 11.

† Col. iii. 5.

‡ Rom. xiii. 14. Gal. iii. 27.

§ Rom. vi. 2, 4.

acting; in which *the former things are passed away, and all things are made new* *. The promises indeed, of this renovation on our part, and of grace to accomplish it, and future happiness to reward it, on God's part, are first made in baptism: which therefore the scripture † calls our new birth to this new life. But then, it is only by continual care, (if providence allows us time) to grow in grace, and become every day more completely dead to all transgression, and alive to all duty, that we shall arrive at the maturity, requisite for our acceptance.

Farther yet: when the word of God intends to give us the most awakening sense, how intire our change must be, and with how unremitted a resolution we must arm ourselves against every bad inclination; then the expression chosen is, not that of dying to sin, but of *mortifying*, killing it. For the original signification of the word, translated, *mortify*, is not the now common one, of keeping under and treating with some austerity, but of destroying, putting to death: as where the apostle saith, *if through the spirit ye do mortify the deeds of the body*, unlawful indulgences, *ye shall live* ‡; and in the passage already cited, *mortify therefore your members, which are upon the earth*. In pursuance of which mortal enmity between religion and wickedness, every serious believer considers himself as a *soldier of Christ* §, whose whole life is to be a warfare against those *lusts which war against the soul* ||.

And lastly, because the great end of our Saviour's incarnation and death was to engage us in this good fight, and enable us to obtain the victory; therefore overcoming and sacrificing to him our unlawful desires, is, by an elegant allusion to the manner of his death, (which was painful and slow, like our extirpation of them) called *crucifying* them; not only here in the text, but in another parallel one; *knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin* ¶. Whence also our apostle saith farther, that *by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*, by the example of his sufferings, and the grace which they have procured, *the world is crucified unto him, and he un-*

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to

* Rev. xxi. 4, 5.

§ 2 Tim. ii. 3, 4.

† John iii. 3—7.

|| 1 Pet. ii. 11.

‡ Rom. viii. 13.

¶ Rom. vi. 6.

to the world *. He regards it no more, than the Jews did our Saviour, when they condemned him to the most ignominious torments, but hates it mortally, and despises it utterly, so far as it is sinful: and is content, that, in return, it should hate and despise him, rather than comply with its wicked customs.

This then is the true christian mortification. And the figures, describing it, are indeed remarkably bold and full of energy: but they are accurate, instructive, animating; and alas, but too necessary, to convince unthinking and unwilling creatures, as we are, (prone to explain away into nothing every precept we can) of the zeal and severity, with which we are to extirpate all that is faulty within our souls. The commands of our blessed Lord himself carry in them the same force: *if our right hand offends us, to cut it off; if our right eye, to pluck it out* †: if any desire we feel, will be a probable occasion of our falling, to suppress it, however dear: if any action we are engaged in, to quit it, however advantageous in other respects. And the reason he adds, admits of no reply. *It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands or two eyes, to be cast into hell-fire*: it is better to undergo the most painful self-denial here, and be recompensed with heavenly felicity hereafter; than to enjoy the *pleasures of sin for a season* ‡, and suffer the vengeance of the Almighty for ever.

Having now explained the rise and general intention of the principal phrases of this sort in scripture, I proceed

II. To specify more distinctly the nature of the duty designed to be taught by them.

And here you cannot fail to perceive at first sight, that harsh treatment of our bodily frame, only for the sake of treating it harshly, is no part of christian mortification, or christian duty. It is indeed a practice contrary to reason, and no less to scripture. For St. Paul saith, *no man*, that is, no wise man, *ever hated his own flesh* §. Yet the opinion, that such things are in themselves acceptable to God, hath not only been common in false religions, but crept into the true: and both furnished unbelievers with an objection against it, and misled believers very unhappily. For they, who fancy, that exercising rigour on their

Gai. vi. 14. † Matth. v. 29, 30. xviii. 8, 9. Mark ix. 43, 45, 47.
 § Heb. xi. 25. § Eph. v. 29.

their persons, hath any good in it, separate from the good uses to which it may contribute, are some of them led to fancy also, that the farther they carry it the better; till they hurt, perhaps ruin, their healths, disorder their understandings, or however sour their tempers: while others conceive, that there is very great merit, in a very little suffering; and consequently persuade themselves, that God will readily excuse the smaller faults of a behaviour not quite so moral as it should be, on their punctual performance of their higher duties, as they esteem them; though, in truth, not only imaginary, but often of little more than imaginary hardship. And thus, whereas common sinners are open to remorse of conscience, which there is hope may, sooner or later, through the grace of God, amend them: these, on the contrary, proceed self-applauded, and fully persuaded of their title to a distinguished share of divine favour. On which account our Saviour tells the Pharisees, men of austerity in some respects, and wondrous exactness in little matters, that *the publicans and the harlots shall go into the kingdom of heaven before them**.

Not that christians, of more abstemious lives than ordinary, are therefore to be condemned as Pharisees and hypocrites; or derided, as weak and superstitious. Every one is bound to employ such means for his preservation from sin, and advancement in piety and virtue, as either God's word hath prescribed, or his own reason and experience recommend. Now some may find rules to be useful or necessary, which to others would be neither. Some again may rashly censure what they would do much better to imitate. And all persons, especially all who live in ease and plenty, should be attentive to *keep their bodies in subjection*†: not harassing them as enemies, but ruling and providing for them as servants, in such manner as to make them both willing to obey, and able to perform their work. They should watch over their natural fondness for pleasure, and tendency to follow the customs of the world; not with unreasonable scrupulousness, but with religious prudence: learn to suspect their favourite inclinations, and the opinions that countenance them: check themselves in proportion as they grow eager, stop and look round them with care: never ad-
venture

* Matth. xxi. 3.

† 1 Cor. ix. 27.

venture to the extremity of what is lawful, but in all dubious cases lean to the undoubtedly safer side: be moderate in the most allowable gratifications of this world, and delight principally in cultivating and improving those pious and virtuous affections, which alone can *make them meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light**; of a happiness intirely spiritual, and abstracted from flesh and blood.

But then, while we observe this caution in regard to worldly objects, we must be careful also, on the other hand, that we carry it not to dangerous or extravagant lengths; that we seem not unthankful to, or suspicious of him, *who hath given us richly all things to enjoy†*; that we disguise not religion by putting it in a melancholy and forbidding dress; that we be not betrayed by the restraints, under which we lay ourselves, either into vain self-opinion and spiritual pride, or a rigidity of temper, very unsuitable to the gentle spirit of the Christian profession: but particularly, that we forbear to condemn, or even dispise, our brethern of more seeming latitude; who, it may be under the appearance of a freer life, (which was our Saviour's own case, for he *came eating and drinking ‡*) preserve really and inwardly a stricter guard over their thoughts, words, and actions, than we do. And in general, all persons ought to take heed, that while they are watching against the approach of one sort of sins, those of another do not find a ready admission. We are willing enough to keep at ever so great a distance from the faults, to which we have little or no inclination; and often affect to make our zeal in that respect remarkable: but then perhaps more favourite vices have easy entrance into our breasts, and take firm possession of them. We are shocked, for instance, and with much cause, at the monstrous and ruinous eagerness for pleasure, the profligate and unprecedented contempt of religion, that prevails in the world: our behaviour, on these heads, is unblameable, exemplary; and we value ourselves upon it beyond bounds. Yet possibly, all the while, we indulge ourselves to the full another way: are unjust and fraudulent, or selfish and unreasonable, or penurious and hard-hearted, or censorious and unforgiving, or peevish and ill-tempered; make every one about us uneasy,

and

* Col. i. 12.

† 1 Tim. vi. 17.

‡ Matth. xi. 19. Luke vii. 34.

and those chiefly, whose happiness ought to be our first care: This is applauding ourselves for being fortified where the enemy is not likely to make an attack: and leaving the places, that are most exposed, quite undefended. Every one therefore ought to study the weak parts of his own heart and conduct, and spend the main of his attention upon these: that so not only a wrong inclination or two may be rooted up, which if left to themselves would scarce grow) or may be sacrificed in favour of others as bad; but the whole *body of sin* be destroyed; the *flesh*, the principle of evil, *with all its affections and lusts*, nailed to the cross of Christ.

And this duty of mortification is no more confined to one season, than to one sin. The practice of it either must be constant, or will be fruitless. The time of Lent indeed hath been more especially appropriated to it: not that we should think the shew, or the reality, of a little more exactness than ordinary, for a few weeks, (productive perhaps only of ill humour) so meritorious; that when we have once got it over, we may live almost as we please, till the unwelcome days return, when we are to atone afresh for our past offences, and so make way for the commission of future ones. For, as the son of *Sirach* observes, *He that washeth himself after the touching of a dead body, if he touch it again, what availeth his washing? So is it with a man, that fasteth for his sins, and goeth again and doth the same. Who will hear his prayer, or what doth his humbling profit him**? Our great concern is to mortify all irregular desires with such incessant care, that there may be as little need, as little room, as possible, to distinguish one season from another in that respect. But because we are strangely apt to postpone a work, generally disagreeable in proportion as it is necessary; our church hath wisely directed, that the negligent, (and we all are such in some measure) should now be more solemnly called to consider their ways, afflict their souls for their transgressions, and renew the intermitted discipline which is requisite to make their hearts better. This is our true business at present. Methods of keeping Lent, which end with it, and leave behind them no durable effect, cannot be of much use;

* *Ecclus xxxiv. 25, 26.*

use; and may be fatal, by deceiving us into a false security, and forgetfulness of what I proposed to shew you,

III. That our christian profession strongly binds us to mortify continually every immoral appetite and passion. *They, that are Christ's, have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts.*

Instead of this, the apostle might have said, (like the philosophers of his own and preceding times) they who are truly rational beings, who see the beauty of virtue and deformity of vice, who feel the pleasures and the pains of the moral sense, who form just notions of the real good and evil of man, who are ambitious of imitating their Creator and acquiring his favour in their present state of existence and perhaps a future one: but in saying, *they who are Christ's*, he hath said all this, and much more. Christianity comprehends every consideration of nature and reason in the fullest manner; and as they are all insufficient, some too speculative and unaffecting, some too disputable and uncertain; adds others of inestimable value, peculiar to itself. A heathen may want almost intirely, and must want in a great degree, both the means of learning what mankind is most deeply interested in, and motives and power to practise what he had learned: a christian, allowed to read and hear the word of God, cannot, without inexcusable negligence: *and of them to whom much is given, much will be required**. Through Christ, who hath enlightened us, we *know all things†*; through Christ which *strengtheneth us*, we *can do all things‡*: through Christ, who died for us, what we do shall be rewarded though deserving nothing, with eternal life. And thus hath the grace of God, which bringeth salvation, not only taught, but enabled us, *denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world§*. They, who are Christ's in name only, bind themselves to this: they, who are in reality his, perform it. *If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his||*: and the fruit of the spirit, we are told immediately before the text, and through the whole Scripture, are the pious movements of a good heart, and the actions of a good life. Our blessed Lord gave himself for us, *that he might sanctify and cleanse us, and present us to himself*
holy

* Luke xii. 48.

† 1 John ii. 20.

‡ Phil. iv. 13.

§ Tit. ii. 11, 12.

|| Rom. viii. 9.

*holy and without blemish**. If then we labour not to become such, we frustrate, so far as our own concerns reaches, his gracious intentions, and make his sufferings vain. If we crucify not our affections and lusts, *we crucify him afresh, and put him to open shame*†; pour contempt on his glorious undertaking ourselves, and expose it to the scorn of others: the consequence of which will be, that as *while we profess to know him, in works we deny him*‡, so will he in the day of judgement *profess to us, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*§. Still it should be observed, that so far both good and bad christians are his as to be always under his dominion. *None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself*, exempted from his authority: *whether we live or die, we are the Lord's*||; but the wicked continue under his government, just as upon earth, rebels continue subjects; not intitled to benefits from their prince, but liable justly to sorer punishments than his other enemies. Think then, will you be *Christ's at his coming*¶, only to have *vengeance taken of you in flaming fire*** , or to *enter with him into his glory*††? If the latter be your choice, the only way to it is, that you think it not too much to crucify your flesh figuratively, renounce and destroy your forbidden desires, however painful it be, for him; since he thought it not too much to let his flesh literally be crucified for you. And if you will make sure of doing this at all, you must do it immediately.

Perhaps you will say, we hope it is done already: for the text assures us, all believers have done it. But observe: at that time almost all professed believers were real ones; for they had no temptation to make a false profession: and in general, speculative believers were practical ones; else they would never have suffered what they did. But in our times, the case is much altered. And in all times, the true method of arguing is, not, *we are Christ's*, and therefore we *have crucified our affections and lusts*: but, *we have crucified our affections and lusts*, and therefore *we are Christ's*. Our faith must be proved from our works: not our works from our faith. *By their fruits ye shall know them*, is the rule††: and by those we must know our own state, as well as that of others.

VOL. II.

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* Eph. x. 25, 26, 27. † Heb. vi. 6. ‡ Tit i. 16. § Matth. vii. 23.
 ¶ Rom. xiv. 7, 8. ¶ 1 Cor. xv. 23. ** 2 Thess. i. 8. †† Luke xxiv. 26.
 †† Matth. vii. 20.

But supposing we have cause to believe it good, have we not greater cause to believe it good, have we not greater cause to be sensible it is not perfect? And should we not be striving continually to make it more so? *They that are Christ's*, the apostle tells us, *have crucified the flesh*. But he doth not tell us, they have done it so effectually and so completely, as they ought. On the contrary he tells us, that he himself had *not yet attained*, but was still *pressing on towards the mark**. And surely we should be doing it without ceasing. Unless we are careful to advance, we shall be driven back; unless we pursue our enemy to destruction: though put to flight, he will return: though *wounded as it were to death, his deadly wound will be healed*†: and gradually, if not suddenly, his empire may become more absolute, and our condition more deplorable, than ever. At least he will be perpetually annoying us, disturbing our peace, taking away our comfort, darkening our prospects. Nor shall we be losers in this life only, by neglect of going on to perfection: but in the next also, the less complete the victory is, the smaller will be the reward: and they *who have sown sparingly, shall reap also sparingly*‡. Let us therefore sow plentifully the seeds of every virtue; and extirpate with such diligence every *root of bitterness*, that there may be the freest room and the fullest nourishment for every grace of the christian life to flourish, and be fruitful. *Of ourselves indeed we can do nothing*§. But this is far from being a just plea for stopping where we are: since *God is able to make all grace abound towards us; that we having always all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work*||. Provided then we apply to him, by the means he hath appointed, and engaged to bless, humble faith, earnest prayer, strict vigilance, and constant use of his holy ordinances, we shall not fail to experience the truth of his promise: *They, that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings, as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint*¶.

* Phil. iii. 12, 13, 14.

† Rev. xiii. 3.

‡ 2 Cor. ix. 6.

§ John xv. 5.

|| 2 Cor. ix. 8.

¶ Isa. xl. 31.

S E R M O N LXXXI.

ON CONFIRMED FAITH IN THE POWER AND JUSTICE OF GOD.

H E B. xi. 17.

By faith, Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he, that had received the promises, offered up his only begotten Son.

THE character of *Abraham* in general is represented throughout the word of God, as highly respectable. But his obedience to the divine command, in devoting to death, and sacrificing, so far as the act of the mind was concerned, his beloved son, the only heir of his family, and of all the gracious predictions made to him, is peculiarly celebrated for its transcendent piety; first in the Old Testament, by an angel from heaven, speaking in the name of God; then in the New, by the apostle St. *James*, as well as the writer of this epistle. But as they, who look at the sun too intently, dazzle their eyes, till all around them, and even the light itself, appears dark: so men have strained their thoughts, in comparing and measuring the weakness of their own faith and resolution against the strength of *Abraham's*, till they have been quite confounded with it. And hence some have imagined this direction to be such a one as could not possibly come from God: whilst others have thought it was a trial, rather of his discernment, than of his dutifulness; and that though he meant well, he might have reasoned better. The former opinion is designed to contradict and discredit scripture: nor is the latter, though intended to remove an objection against it, by any means consistent with it. For we should never have found there such lofty encomiums of his proceeding so far, through mistake, towards an action,

which would have been extremely unnatural and barbarous, if the injunction to do it had not altered the quality of it: but whatever kind acknowledgement had been made of his good purpose, there would certainly have been a reproof of his wrong judgment; at least an admonition, that it was wrong: whereas we find nothing but unmixed commendation of his behaviour. For the sake, therefore, both of such as incline to either of these notions, and of many humbler and devouter minds; who yet feel, (as perhaps we have now and then most of us done) great reluctance in their affections against this article of sacred history, and some difficulties in point of reason also; I shall endeavour to shew distinctly,

I. The possibility of God's giving such an order.

II. The evidence which *Abraham* had, and we may have now, of his actually giving it.

III. The improbability, that the obedience paid to it should have any bad effect in after times.

IV. The good ends, that might be and were promoted by it.

I. The possibility of God's giving such an order.

Indeed, were we but nearly so modest as we ought to be, we should be very backward to question, whether a being of unfearchable wisdom can do what there is any competent proof he hath done: and should carry a strong sense of our own short-sightedness and incapacity along with us, to check all petulance of arguing on such points. But happily a moderate submission of our poor understandings to the divine, will be sufficient on the occasion before us.

That *the God of the spirits of all flesh**, in whose hand is the *soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind†*, may take away at his pleasure what he hath given only during his pleasure‡, cannot possibly be doubted. We experience, that in the daily course of his providence he takes away the most innocent, the most deserving, the most useful persons, very unexpectedly, and, to our thinking, very unseasonably; for causes not to be known till *the day of the revelation of his righteous judgment§*. And, shocking as this may often seem, or afflicting as it may feel, it is yet no more than removing his subjects,) in whom he hath absolute property, and over whom he hath unlimited authority) from one part of his dominions to another,

* Numb. xvi. 22. † Job. xii. 10. ‡ Ibid. i. 21. § Rom. ii. 5.

another, still to remain under the same gracious government, and only to serve in a different and better station.

Now what he so continually doth by various diseases, and what we call accidents, (many of them attended with long and dreadful sufferings) why might he not, if on any occasion he saw it proper, do by a shorter and easier method, by the hands of another human creature? Magistrates appoint their officers to execute those, whom they have condemned. Kings and generals appoint their armies to destroy multitudes, that are guiltless themselves, though possibly involved in the guilt of others. Killing would be murder in both these cases, if a lawful command did not alter the nature of them. But that supercedes and overrules the obligations to the contrary, which else would arise from the common relation of man to man. Surely then God might always give the same command whenever he thought fit to interpose. And the person, who had his authority, was well authorized, and bound to act according to his commission. Else not only *Abraham* would have acted unjustifiably in this matter, but the *Jews* in making war on the *Canaanites*, *Jehu* in extirpating the house of *Abab*, many other persons in many other things, all which, the scripture saith, were done in obedience to the voice of heaven. And the consequences of making these concessions, (for we cannot stop at one) every serious believer will see with horror. But in truth we need make none of them. If God cannot empower a person to do any thing, but what would be lawful without his order, some of the lowest of us have a right to do more than he. And if he can empower in one such case, why not in all: in that of life and death, as well as the rest?

Since then his mere command given might oblige one man to take away the life of another: it might oblige a father to take away the life of his son. For the particular relation of kindred, can no more be pleaded as a ground of disobeying the divine will, than the universal relation of humanity. We own, God hath enjoined parents to love their children: but not better, than they love their Maker. He hath planted in their hearts instincts of warm affection towards them: but not to the prejudice of their duty towards himself. The law of nature, that of the land, may require a man to put his guilty son to death; to expose his innocent son, for the needful service of the public, to unavoidable destruction; nay, himself to fight
against

against his son, if they are members of two societies at war with each other. And why might not God require whatever of the like sort he judged to be requisite? The magistrate's only justification is, that he acts on the authority of God, as declared by the voice of nature: and why is it not a sufficient justification, that *Abraham* acted upon the same authority, as declared by the voice of revelation? One end of sacrifices probably was, to recognize, that all things are God's gift, by surrendering some choice parts of them to him in this form. Now *Isaac* had been the gift of God, in a most peculiar sense: his parents had enjoyed the comfort of him for many years. And if he, who might have snatched him away before, whenever he would, by any of the common methods, was pleased to demand him back at last by as extraordinary a one, as that in which he bestowed him, what could be said against it?

I acknowledge, it may seem hard-heartedness to argue in so rigid a manner on so tender a subject: and am very sensible, that there is no possibility of considering *Abraham's* case as our own, nay of imagining it distinctly as his, without bleeding inwardly at the thought: and rejoicing from ones soul, that the days of such commands are long ago past. But still the right of issuing them forth was ever inherent in God, and must be confessed, and when it is needful, vindicated. To this very hour both religion and virtue call upon us frequently to controul and act against our most affectionate inward feelings, even towards them that are dearest to us; though not near to the same degree, that *Abraham* did. And it is a very ungrateful return, instead of thanking God, that he doth not carry our trial so far, to insist that he cannot.

He cannot indeed require what is absolutely and always unfit: but taking away life is fit or unfit, according to circumstances. He cannot require a parent to hate his child: and it is the height of infidel perverseness, to interpret our Saviour's words, of *hating father and mother and wife and children**, literally and strictly, when we have a plain direction to interpret them comparatively†. But he may require a parent, as we have daily proof, willingly to yield up and resign his child: and to offer him, is but one step further, however painful a one. He cannot give men a general commission to take away

each

* Luke xiv. 26.

† Matth. x. 37.

each others lives: for this would be inconsistent with the scheme of his providence, and destructive to mankind. But he may give a particular commission of that sort in some extraordinary juncture: for it may be to their advantage. He cannot order a single life to be taken away, or a single action of any kind to be done, without reason; for it would be contrary to the perfection of his nature. But he may have many reasons utterly beyond our reach. And to assert that he can have none, is to set up our own understandings for infinite, and deny his to be such. Whether we can perceive any reasons, and what, in the present case, will be enquired under the fourth head. It suffices for this first, that God might see reasons to give forth the command, which the scripture saith he did. He saw indeed at the same time reasons against the execution of it: as *Solomon* did against the execution of his, though a very wise one, for the division of the child *. But *Abraham* could by no means penetrate so far: and therefore was bound to obey, if on due consideration he was sure he was ordered. Let us now then examine

II. What evidence he might have of this, and we may have even now.

The Almighty and all-wise cannot be without some way, probably many ways, of notifying his will, whatever it be, clearly to his creatures: for even we can notify ours clearly, one to another. If an equal of ours were to bid us do what *Abraham* was bidden: though we ought to refuse obedience, yet we should not doubt, or we need not long doubt, who it was, or what he said. And why could not *Abraham* be equally certain, when God spoke to him? That we know not, how God shewed it to be himself, is no argument in the least, that he did not shew it effectually. If it were, it would be an argument against all revelation, as well as this. Some indeed have objected, that *Abraham* could not have so full proof by any revelation, that God enjoined him to sacrifice his son, as he had by reason, that it was criminal. But, you have seen, he had no proof of its being criminal, if God enjoined it: but full proof of the contrary. And therefore the objection, rightly stated, is only, that he had not so much evidence of the injunction, as he had, that the action, unless it
were

* 1 Kings iii. 25.

were enjoined, was unlawful. Now even this is more, than can ever be made out. But, supposing it: A judge hath seldom or never such absolute certainty of the guilt of a prisoner tried before him, as he hath, that unless he be guilty, he should not condemn him. Yet still, if the evidence of his guilt be sufficient, he condemns him very justly. And so, if the evidence of God's command was sufficient, *Abraham* very justly might have sacrificed *Isaac*. Let us therefore consider, without prejudice, whether it was or not: fairly taking the case, as it lies in scripture.

There we find, that he had enjoyed the privilege of supernatural communications from God, for above the space of fifty years: during which time we have many of them recorded, and there might be many more. He had infallible assurance, that they were true ones; not only from visible appearances of angels, and of the divine glory, but from the punctual accomplishment of the predictions contained in them: particularly, the destruction of *Sodom*, and the birth of *Isaac*, in his and *Sarah*'s old age; events, which God alone could foresee, or bring to pass. And it was *after these things*, as *Moses* takes care to give notice expressly *, that he was tried with the command to offer up his son. Now surely by so long experience he was thoroughly qualified to distinguish real revelations from imaginary ones. Nor would God either permit the man, whom he honoured with the title of *his friend* †, to be misled into a horrible and most afflicting crime, by a delusion of Satan, attended with all the external marks of truth; or deliver a command to him of so extraordinary a nature, and leave him doubtful of its genuineness; but would certainly remove all possible difficulty about believing it, when those of obeying it were singly so hard to surmount. Indeed an order, so strangely different from any that he had ever received, and which deprived him of the dearest blessing he had, must of itself put him on his guard, to the very utmost, against mistaking: however prepared he might be by the former mysterious dispensations of providence, for future ones. That he loved *Isaac* most tenderly, no one can dispute: that he had a general tenderness of heart, his interceding for the vilest of sinners clearly proves: that his notions of God's moral attributes were just and lively,

appears

* Gen. xxii. 1.

† 2 Chron. xx. 7. Isa. xl. i. 8.

appears from his own words in his very intercession; *that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: shall not the judge of all the earth do right**? And that he had any enthusiastic turn of mind, or any superstitious principles, that could induce him to think the offering up his son prescribed when it was not, or the voluntary perpetration of so shocking a deed an act of merit, that could procure him a compensation from heaven for destroying his whole comfort and hopes at once; there is no shadow either of proof or likelihood. We never find him elsewhere attempting to sacrifice human victims. There had nothing remarkable of any sort befallen him, that could even seem to require one; much less so exceedingly precious a one: and the *heathens* themselves did not offer up their sons, without being, as they thought, in the most urgent necessity and extreme danger. Indeed we are not certain, that there was in his time such a practice in the world: or, if there was, that he knew it. Or if he did; as we find it anciently denied†, and no where affirmed, that this execrable custom prevailed in his native country, probably his education must lead him to abhor it: and certainly the whole spirit of his religion was totally different from the bloody, as well as the lewd, idolatries and superstitions of *Canaan*.

Some indeed have suspected the contrary, because it is not said, that he expressed any surprize, or even reluctance, on receiving the command. But neither is it said, that he expressed any joy, when a countermand stopped his hand. Yet must he not of necessity, must not any man in like circumstances, be his religious opinions what they will, have felt both? and therefore why may not such things well be understood, without being related? and especially as to the former, what if the sacred historian drew a veil over agitations, too strong to be described: as the painter of a heathen story is said to have done, and is praised for doing it, on the same occasion? Might not *Abraham*, notwithstanding this, feel the utmost agony of paternal fondness; beg of God to preserve him from illusion and error: beg that, *if it were possible, this cup might pass from him*‡: yet still, when the will of God, so far as he was capable of judging, appeared to be otherwise, acquiesce without expostulation? For *Sodom*, it is true, he did expostulate. But how

VOL. II.

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* Gen. xviii. 25. † *Philo de Abrahamo*, p. 27. ‡ Matth. xxvi. 39.

different: were the two cases? That was a charitable plea for others: this had been an interested one for himself. If *Sodom* was destroyed, all hope of repentance was cut off from a multitude of sinners: if *Isaac* suffered, it was not as a punishment; but as a trial, sure to end well. And therefore the former case called for intercession: the latter, for obedience only.

Having no room then to apprehend, that *Abraham* had any thing in his mind to mislead him; we can have none to doubt, but he examined such an order as this with the greatest circumspection, and yielded only to irresistible evidence of its being divine. Besides, it was not given him to be executed that moment, without leisure to recollect himself. Three days intervened before the time for the execution of it: and during all these his son was continually in his sight, going along with him to the place of sacrifice: nothing interrupted his attention to the horrors of this one dreadful subject. Full time was allowed for imagination to cool, for nature to work, for objections of every sort to be raised. Yet *Abraham* persevered: and therefore his conviction must be founded on proofs, that could not be shaken.

It might indeed appear strange to him, that God should mention no motive to an injunction so severe. But he would perceive immediately, that one motive was the trial of his faith, which was tried more completely by assigning no other: and he would perceive afterwards, that no other could be assigned, because the intention of heaven was that the deed should not be done.

Besides this lesser difficulty, there were, in point of reason, two principal ones. The first was, the unlawfulness of the action: and how that might be removed, I have shewn you. The other, to which the verse after the text refers, was, the prediction, that *in Isaac his seed should be called*: that the holy nation, and the promised Messiah, should descend from him. For, it might be alledged, how could that be verified, if he was to be slain now? And yet, with whatever laws of human society God might dispense, he would certainly preserve his own truth inviolate. But in what manner *Abraham* answered this, the following verse informs us. *He accounted, he reasoned, for so the word signifies, that God was able to raise him up even from the dead: whence also he received him in a figure.* The birth of *Isaac* was like receiving him from the dead,

dead, on account of the age of both his parents. Yet when it was foretold, *Abraham*, to use the words of *St. Paul*, considered not his own body, now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of *Sarah's* womb, but was fully persuaded, that what God had promised, he was able to perform*: and the event justified his faith. Encouraged by this, he now a second time against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations†. For that power, which had quickened the barren aged womb, could also quicken the lifeless dust. It was only carrying on the same kind of wonderful interposition, that he had already seen begun. And thus did that very prediction, which might seem to create the most insuperable difficulty, afford him a clew to extricate him out of all difficulty in point of argument, intirely. For if *Isaac* was to have a posterity, he must be raised again: and that would vindicate the command of God, and the patriarch's obedience, to all mankind‡.

Some have observed a yet farther circumstance in the history; that God bade him offer his son upon one of the mountains, which he should tell him of§: and hence they conclude, not improbably, that when it is said, he lift up his eyes the third day, and saw the place afar off||, he might have known it by some remarkable sign from heaven, pointing it out to him. And this would be a new and most seasonable confirmation, that he was doing what he ought. And supposing him at length to shew it *Isaac* too, it might well produce in him that intire submission to so strange a death, which may else look hardly credible. For he was unquestionably of age, to have attempted either resistance or escape, since he was of age to carry the wood for the sacrifice: yet he appears absolutely resigned; and seems to have been bound for no other reason, than because victims usually were. But still he might have yielded himself up, not in consequence of any immediate notification to him from above: but from mere dependance on his father's well known judgement and affection. It must have been from one of the

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two

* Rom. iv. 19, 21.

† Ver. 18.

‡ Neither *Philo* nor *Josephus* intimate, that *Abraham* reasoned thus. But the author of *Nizzachon vetus*, in *Wagenseil*, p. 22. doth: who therefore probably borrowed this solution from the New Testament, or some christian.

§ Gen. xxii. 2.

|| Gen. xxii. 4.

two motives : and supposing it to be only from the latter and the weaker, it doth the highest honour to the characters of them both.

But a further and very strong evidence of *Abraham's* acting by divine command, was that which appeared in the close of this wonderful transaction. If an evil and lying spirit, if a gloomy turn of mind, if an emulation of any barbarous heathen rite, had prompted him to design this act ; they would have prompted him also to complete the execution of it, and never have let him stop short just where he did. Nay, if these bad motives had influenced him, and in great mercy God had stopt him ; he would surely at the same time have shewn him his error, instead of praising and rewarding him. And therefore his motives were not bad : but a wise and gracious being was the author of the command, as well as the dispensation.

But to see this yet more fully, let us consider,

III. The improbability of its producing any hurtful effects in after days.

Men may indeed run mad, and think *Abraham's* example authorizes them to kill their nearest relation, or whom they will. And so they may run mad, and think the public good, or any thing else, authorizes them. But that any one ever did plead the precedent of *Abraham* for such an action, I believe is not pretended. And plainly no one in his senses can. *Abraham* was a public and extraordinary person : he was a sovereign prince, and accountable to no power upon earth : he lived when divine revelations were frequent, had long been acquainted with the proper marks of them, and used to see them verified : his inclinations and his interest conspired in the strongest manner to preserve him from mistake : he knew by God's promise, that if he sacrificed his child by God's order, he would soon rise again : and at last he was not permitted to do, what merely for a trial, he was commanded : nor hath any human creature ever been commanded it since. How can this possibly be encouragement to a private and common man ; subject, he and his whole family, to the laws of the society, of which he is a member ; born 4000 years after *Abraham* in a quite different state of things ; when no revelations are to be looked for, but all pretences to them suspected in the highest degree ; who hath had no experience of them, nor can guess
of

of what nature they should be, if there were any : how can he dream of encouragement from hence, to commit a deed, contrary to the standing rules of his own reason, of human authority, and of the word of God, merely because he hath a strong inclination to it, perhaps to serve some selfish or wild purpose, that he hath at heart ?

Still some have alledged, that however plausibly we may argue, in fact human sacrifices began early in the world ; and what could be so likely to give rise, or, at least, countenance to them, as this command ? But, according to some old accounts, they began before it. And suppose they did not ; still, if any person had either learned them, or been reconciled to them from hence, it must surely have been *Abraham's* posterity. And yet we do not find, that ever any one of them, excepting the single doubtful case of *Jephtha* 700 years after, so much as once thought of such an offering to the God of their fathers. It was idols only, that they worshipped thus ; and they did it in imitation, not of *Abraham*, but of those very *Canaanites*, whom they had been ordered to destroy for their wickedness, and expressly forbidden to follow in this act of it. *Take heed to thyself, that thou inquire not, saying, how did these nations serve their gods ? Even so will I do likewise. For every abomination to the Lord, which he hateth, have they done: their sons and their daughters have they burnt in the fire to their gods**. Nor did the *Canaanites* alone, but nations, that probably had never heard of *Abraham* or of them, offer such victims. And therefore the custom seems altogether the offspring either of diabolical delusions, or of priestly tyranny, combined with gross ignorance and frantic terror ; suggesting, that the most precious and most painful sacrifices must be the most efficacious. But had any ever supported themselves in this practice, by the history of *Abraham*, it must have been by the grossest abuse of that history : and every proceeding, every mercy of God, is liable to equal abuse. A command of such a nature, never given but once, and to one man, and then countermanded before execution, and clearly explained to be meant, neither for the averting of any danger, nor the expiation of any sin, but merely for an extraordinary trial of that man's dutifulness, could not in reality make the actual performance

* Deut. xii. 30, 31.

formance of the thing, so commanded, a common usage for quite different purposes: any more than *Solomon's* order for *dividing the child in two** could make the performance of that a common usage. Indeed the directly contrary conclusion was the natural one: that God approved not human victims; but only such, as he had provided for *Abraham*, instead of his son. And if the computation of some chronologers be right, that, in a few years after this time, sacrificing men was abolished in that part of *Egypt*, which lay nearest to *Abraham's* residence: (where perhaps it was never taken up again) we shall have room to think the transaction, that we are now considering, might have a most happy consequence, in that very respect, in which it is groundlessly accused of having a bad one.

But thus I am got insensibly into what I proposed to shew

IV. The good ends, which might be, and were, promoted by it.

Indeed, could we discover none, we are just as ignorant of the design of several things in God's creation: which appear, though certainly without reason, both useless and hurtful. But in the present case many valuable purposes are visible and obvious.

This command was, in the first place, a noble manifestation of *Abraham's* faith and obedience. The hardest of those orders which he had received before, was very supportable: and they were accompanied with great promises of advantage; in particular of worldly advantage. This, on the other hand, was severe beyond expression; and had no promise or consolation at all annexed to it: but, instead of that, it enumerated to him the most cutting circumstances, and placed them before him in the fullest light. *Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and offer him up†.* Yet, pierced to the heart, as he must be, by these expressions, he dutifully submitted; without seeking excuses from any dissuasive reasonings, without throwing on any one the least share of the burthen of his own anguish; without exposing himself to the tender solicitations of *Sarah*; without acquainting *Isaac* what was intended, before it became absolutely needful. How astonishingly

* 1 Kings iii. 25.

† Gen. xxii. 2.

ly great, how composed, how considerate a self-denial was this !

Yet further, the piteous deed was not to be done immediately, whilst the impression of the divine voice was sounding fresh in his ears, and excluded every other sentiment ; but at the distance of three whole days : during which every feeling of paternal affection would return in full force ; and even the inferior consideration of what his family and the world would think, and say to so unnatural an action, if *Isaac* did not rise again instantly, as there was no proof he would, must singly have a weight very hard to be supported. Nor were these days to be spent in retirement, in meditation and prayer, to fortify his resolution ; but altogether in the company of the dear object, whom he was to slay ; whose conversation would be in a thousand instances the more moving, as he went along with him unsuspecting of what was to follow : and whose innocent question at last, *my father, behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering**, must, one should think, have completed the melting down of all human resolution. But wisdom preserved him, as the book of *Wisdom* expresses it†, *blameless unto God, and kept him strong against his tender compassion towards his son* : till now, when the sacrifice of the mind was made to the utmost, and only the outward act was wanting, the hand being stretched forth‡ even for that ; the goodness of the Almighty broke forth on a sudden, like the sun from behind a black cloud concealing it, and the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, lay not thine hand upon the lad : for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me§. The transport of hearing these words must have made in a moment large amends for the preceding pangs. *Isaac* was restored to him without going through the bitterness of death|| : reproach and misconstruction was avoided : the dreadful deed dispensed with : the willing mind accepted : and a solemn approbation pronounced over him from above, anticipating the final sentence, *well done, good and faithful servant¶*.

Indeed, before this, God had declared, *I know Abraham***. But now he knew him by a new proof : and, which is the constant

* Gen. xxii. 7.

† Wisd. x. 5.

‡ Gen. xxii. 10.

§ Ver. 11, 12.

|| 1 Sam. xv. 32.

¶ Matth. xxv. 21.

** Gen. xviii. 19.

stant scripture sense of his trying any one, he manifested him by the trial, to angels, to men, to himself: *and experience wrought in him sure hope not to be ashamed upon any future occasion, because the love of God was thus shed abroad in his heart**. A further discovery was, and a very delightful one it must be, that, by so decisive an experiment of *Isaac's* piety, his father knew him to be worthy of his utmost affection; and worthy of the choice, which God had made of him, to support religion, and be the progenitor of the promised seed.

Nor did this trial convey only improvement, and comfort, and reward here and hereafter, to *Abraham*: but useful instruction to others also. Hence it appeared, that the servants of the true deity were as ready to perform his hardest commands, as those of false ones could be to obey theirs: but that he did not require of them to *give their first-born for their transgression, the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul; but to do justly, and to love mercy, and walk humbly with their God*†. Hence also it appeared, that God was not partial in his choice of the *Jews* to be his peculiar people: but properly fixed on that nation, where the most illustrious instances of religious obedience had been given; for which this prerogative, granted them, was a fit recompence; besides that the influence of such examples and teachers of it, afforded a greater probability of its lasting there, than any where else.

Hence likewise we may all of us learn, what is yet more material, not to fear making use of our reason in religion, for *Abraham* used his on the point before us; but still to make a sober and modest use of it: to believe and do what we plainly see is taught and commanded, though neither the particulars of the doctrine, nor the grounds of the precept, be at all clear; and not to reject hastily and rashly what we read in scripture concerning occasional directions given formerly from above, though it be difficult to account for some of them at present. We may learn further, that the *victory, which overcometh the world is our faith*‡ but that we are to shew our faith by our works§, as St. *James* observes *Abraham* shewed his¶; not thinking our own pressures heavier, and our own virtue in bearing them greater

* Rom. v. 3, 4, 5.

§ James ii. 18.

† Mic. vi. 7, 8.

¶ Ver. 21.

‡ 1 John v. 4.

greater, than any ones else ever were; but joining humility with resignation. And lastly, we may learn to obey God cheerfully in the most unwelcome injunctions, and trust him boldly in the most inextricable perplexities: which last we find was an ancient lesson, founded on this narration. For, from *Abraham's* saying to *Isaac*, *God will provide*, (in the *Hebrew* it is *see for*) *a lamb**, the place received its name, *Jehovah-jireh*, and a proverb its rise, *in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen†*: that is, in the very extremity, if not before, provision will be made. And indeed, as this part of the patriarch's history is recorded in the earliest book of the bible; it is impossible to say, of how frequent use, or how great upon the whole, it may have been, from his own time downwards, to good persons in all ages of the church, *Jewish* and *Christian*, under public afflictions and private. But evidently it may be of unspeakable benefit to us, if we set but our hearts to *walk in the steps of his faith‡*, in hope of being *blessed with faithful Abraham§*, who is *the father of all them, that believe||*.

Many however may still object, with too much truth, that his pattern, though they allow it to be an excellent one, is one that they could never follow, were they ever so plainly commanded. But then, be thankful at least, that you are not commanded: and be assured you never will. Admire and honour, but never think of blaming, him that was able to do so much; and by that method, amongst others, excite yourselves to do what you are called to. Since, through divine grace, he bore so amazing a trial, the same grace can surely strengthen you to bear common ones: and you may well submit contentedly, if your dearest blessing is taken from you, since he was willing to sacrifice his with his own hand; comforting himself, as you may too, by the full assurance of a future resurrection. *For if we believe, that Jesus died and rose again: them also, which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him¶*.

And this leads me to one view more of the sacrifice of *Isaac*: the resemblance it hath to that of *Christ*. No wonder it was so extraordinary a transaction in itself, if it was intended to prefigure the most extraordinary and mysterious one, that the world ever saw: as the agreeing circumstances prove

VOL. II.

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* Gen. xxii. 8.

§ Gal. iii. 6.

† Ver. 14.

‡ Rom. iv. 11.

‡ Rom. iv. 12.

¶ 1 Thess. iv. 14.

it must. In both cases you see a good and kind father causing his beloved, only, and innocent son to suffer death. *Isaac* was heir to the promises of the temporal *Canaan*: through Christ we claim the inheritance of the heavenly. *Isaac* carried the wood, on which he was bound, in order to be offered up*: Christ carried the cross†, on which he was afterwards nailed, and put to death. The place where God appointed the former should die, and where the latter died actually, was the very same; *the land of Moriah*‡, that is, of God manifested; on one of the mountains of which the temple stood; on another, our Saviour's cross. The term of three days too is remarkably specified in each history§. *The lamb*, which *Abraham* said, *God would provide*||, naturally turns our thoughts to him whom the Baptist calls the Lamb of God¶; and the ram substituted for *Isaac*** , to the temple-sacrifices of animals, types of the atonement of Christ. Then lastly, the mountain where provision was made for *Abraham's* distress, deserved its name infinitely better, on account of God's providing there for the redemption of mankind.

These

* Gen. xxii. 6.

† John xix. 17.

‡ Gen. xxii. 2. 2 *Chr.* iii. 1. saith, the temple was built on Mount *Moriah*, where the Lord appeared to *David*. *Joseph. Ant.* 1. 1. c. 13. §. 1, 2, saith, that *Μοριον ορος* where the temple was afterwards built was the place where *Abraham* was directed to offer *Isaac*. The book of *Cozzi*, p. 85. saith the same thing. *Jerom. Qu. Heb. in Gen. xxii. 2.* saith of the *Hebrews* in general, that they affirm it. Yet *Tillotson*, in the end of his sermon on this text, mentions him, as saying from an ancient and constant tradition of the *Jews*, that *Moriah* was *Calvary*. But he specifies not the place. *Reland Pal.* p. 853. saith, “ *Mons Moria* 2 *Chr.* iii. 1. distingui omnino debet a regione *Moria*, in qua Deus “ montem aliquem (erant enim plures in illa regione) se monstratum “ *Abrahamo* dicit, ubi filium suum offerat ” But I think he doth not mention the land of *Moriah* elsewhere. Nor doth he explain here, whether he meant any more, than that the mountain was to be distinguished from the land as a part from the whole. He saith, p. 854. that *Moriah* was a part of *Sion*, and p. 860. that *Euseb* and *Jerom* in *Onomastico* place *Golgotha* to the north of *Sion*. And they do: but say nothing there of *Moriah*. *Witr. Obs. Sacr.* 1. 2. c. 10. §. 8. p. 397, 398. thinks the whole tract of country, in which *Zion*, *Calvary*, &c. were, was called the land of *Moriah*.

§ The following words are quoted from the ancient *Jewish* book, *Bereschith Rabba*: there are many spaces of three days in scripture, one of which is the Resurrection of the *Messiah*. It is not in the present copies: but probably was in the ancient. See *Schoettg. de Messia*, 1. 6. c. 5. § 5.

‡ Gen. xxii. 8.

¶ John i. 29. 34.

** Gen. xxii. 13.

These things the patriarch indeed could not understand, unless they were revealed to him : for the likeness of two objects cannot be discerned, till both appear. Perhaps he was told the intent, and thus *saw the day of Christ and was glad**. How gracious an ending of so terrifying a dispensation ! But however that were, we now may justly conclude, that what he then required *Abraham* to do for him, he had purposed from eternity, in the counsel of unsearchable wisdom, to do for his lost creatures. And, let the comforting reflection dwell with you, *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things*† ?

* John viii. 56.

† Rom. viii. 32.

S E R M O N LXXXII.

THE PRESUMPTION OF PRYING INTO RELIGIOUS MYSTERIES.

DEUT. xxix. 29.

The secret things belong unto the Lord our God : but those things, which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever ; that we may do all the words of this law.

IT is one material consideration, amongst many, in favour of the *Jewish* and *Christian* scriptures, that they preserve throughout so due a medium in the discoveries, which they make, of divine truths, as to direct the faith and practice of men without indulging their curiosity. The writings of enthusiasts would of course have been overrun with mysteries : and much fuller of explanations, that would make them still more obscure, than of the plain doctrines of piety and morals. Impostors would never have neglected to recommend themselves by doing us so singular a pleasure, as that of letting us into all the arcana of heaven. Both would have entertained us, as they very safely might, with long and astonishing accounts of the essence of God, the orders and employments of invisible beings, of the counsels of providence in the government both of them and us, of the particulars in which the future happiness and misery of man will consist. Now on the contrary, of these matters holy writ gives no other than brief, imperfect, general notices : and those merely in subservience to the far less agreeable subjects, of our duties to God, each other, and ourselves.

Thus it delivers predictions of future events : not for the vain amusement of the inquisitive : but partly for direction, warning, or encouragement to particular nations and ages : partly to establish the truth of revelation, in all nations and
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ages, by their accomplishment. It contains also supernatural doctrines: but such only, as make the ground-work, more or less, of our obligations, or our hopes. These it was evidently requisite for us to know: and accordingly they are notified to us: but without any art used to render the strangest of them plausible, or any care taken to gratify us with full information about them, or to shew us why it is withheld. The articles of belief are laid down with the utmost simplicity: our assent to them is required on the testimony of God: and when once we have been told enough to regulate our practice, we are only told farther, that *faith without works is dead**. A grievous disappointment to our wishes undoubtedly: but still our reason must allow, that this is the proper conduct of the Lord of all to his creatures: and we find it to be his perpetual conduct from the beginning of the Bible to the end. What our corresponding duty is, we are taught in several places; but no where so distinctly and fully, as in the text: which conveys as necessary instruction, to this day, as it did originally, though relating in part to different points. And happy would men always have been made, and happy might they become yet, by the observance of its rules. These are,

I. That we should never pry into matters, which infinite wisdom hath concealed. For *the secret things belong unto the Lord our God.*

II. That we should receive with attentive humility whatever it communicates. For *those things, which are revealed, belong to us and to our children for ever.*

III. That we should allow every divine truth its due influence on our behaviour. For we are to learn them, *that we may do all the words of this law.*

These are the maxims, which ought to be established in our minds, before we examine into any particular doctrine: and the previous thought, how particular doctrines will be affected by them, ought to be avoided, as far as is possible. They should be explained without partiality, embraced without jealousy, and their genuine consequences admitted, whatever they may prove to be.

I. That

* James ii. 20.

I. That we should never pry into matters, which infinite wisdom hath concealed. For we shall seldom, if at all, be wiser for such inquiries: we shall never be happier or better: and we shall usually be more wretched, and less innocent.

In what reason or experience discovers to us, farther speculations or trials may produce new discoveries. But of articles depending on mere revelation, as we could have discerned nothing without it, we shall be able to discern very little, of any thing, beyond it. In the shortest and seemingly most obvious consequences, drawn concerning subjects, that lie naturally out of our reach, we must be exceedingly liable to mistakes: and venturing far into the dark, is the sure way to stumble. Another state may probably withdraw the veil, and acquaint us clearly and familiarly with what now perplexes our reasonings, and wearies our conjectures. Let us wait then contentedly for the time, which of necessity we must wait for: and apply to ourselves the comfort, which our Saviour gave St. Peter on a different occasion, *what I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter**. Yet even then, truths will remain, the full comprehension of which must for ever be impossible, not only to us, but to the highest creatures of that almighty being, one of whose distinctions, inculcated in scripture, is, *God only wise*†. His nature and attributes being unlimited, his works and providence reaching through immensity and eternity, the greatest advances of finite beings, must be infinitely distant from a complete understanding of them. *Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven: what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? the measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea*‡.

But could inquiry add more to our knowledge than it can: would it increase our happiness? We meet with difficulties, and should be glad of solutions: we enter a little way into a subject; see that vastly more lies behind, and earnestly long to be masters of it. But if we were so, are we at all sure, whether fresh doubts and questions, more embarrassing perhaps than the present, might not immediately arise from thence? We find it so in the visible world, where we had less ground

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* John xiii. 7. † Rom. xvi. 27. 1 Tim. i. 17. Jude 25.
‡ Job. xi. 7, 8, 9.

to expect it. New facts are daily observed, new properties of bodies discovered, new deductions made from them: and what is the consequence? Why, that the scheme of things appears deeper and less fathomable, for every step we take in hopes of getting to the bottom of it. In all likelihood therefore the same is the case of the spiritual world too: and, by knowing more of it, we should be farther from being satisfied than ever, if our satisfaction depends on knowing all. The system of religion is fully taught us by common reason, and the plain parts of scripture. The defence of it is conducted most prudently by owning our ignorance where we are ignorant, which gives no advantages; whereas affectation of the contrary gives many. The practice of it consists, not in filling our heads with unnecessary speculations, but applying our hearts to necessary duties. The rewards of it are annexed to believing and doing what is required of us: and how can we be the better then for aiming at more?

Indeed we shall scarcely avoid being much the worse. By engaging in matters, of which we are unqualified to judge, we shall be in danger of judging materially wrong; either mistaking the nature, or even denying the truth of religion, like those of old, who *professing themselves to be wise, became fools**. And the errors, into which we may thus fall, will be the less excusable, as they will proceed from our own rashness. Besides, the more intent persons are on pursuing their theories, the less time, and usually the less concern, they will have for performing their obligations: excepting, it may be, some fanciful ones, which they have built on their imagined discoveries: resembling those *worshippers of angels*, whom St. Paul charges with *intruding into things, which they had not seen, being vainly puffed up by their fleshly minds*†. Superfluous inquisitiveness is indeed sometimes accompanied with excessive diffidence: and then, though less criminal, it produces most tormenting anxieties. But commonly it proceeds from a degree of that irreverent vanity, which possessed our parent *Eve*, and cost mankind so dear, of invading such knowledge, as God hath reserved to himself, instead of acquiescing cheerfully in so much as he hath imparted.

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* Rom. i. 22.

† Col. ii. 18.

Then with this undutiful spirit easily associates itself a still more mischievous one, of uncharitableness and spiritual tyranny. For when once men are assuming enough to determine, out of their own inventions, things, which their Maker hath not determined, the next natural step is, to *contend* for them far more earnestly, than for *the faith once delivered to the saints**: casting off christian love, refusing communion or toleration, and too often renouncing common humanity, to all who differ from them. And therefore the apostle gives *Timothy*, at the same time, these two directions: *Follow righteousness, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But foolish and unlearned questions* (and nothing is more *unlearned*, than disputing in the dark) *avoid; knowing that they do gender strife*†.

On all accounts then we should keep close to plain reason and plain scripture: let our assent be determinate, as far as they are undeniably so; but make no decision concerning what is doubtful, invent no groundless hypothesis to clear up what is obscure, nor carry on too long chains of argument from what seems the most evident. I conclude this head with that excellent advice of the son of *Sirach*. *Seek not out the things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength. But what is commanded thee, think thereupon with reverence: for it is not needful for thee to see with thine eyes the things which are in secret*‡. *Be not curious in unnecessary matters: for more things are shewed unto thee, than men understand. Many are deceived by their own vain opinion: and an evil suspicion hath overthrown their judgment. Without eyes thou shalt want light: profess not therefore the knowledge that thou hast not*§.

II. The next rule, which *Moses* gives, is that we should receive, with attentive humility, whatever infinite wisdom communicates to us. *For those things, which are revealed, belong to us and to our children for ever.*

Indeed let any proposition be delivered to us, as coming from God or from man, we can believe it no farther than we understand it: and therefore if we do not understand it at all, we cannot

* Jude 3. † 2 Tim. ii. 23, 23. ‡ The Greek hath it, more briefly and expressively, thus: *For of the hidden things thou hast no need.*
§ Eccles iii. 21,—25.

cannot believe it at all ; I mean, explicitly : but only be persuaded, that it contains some truth or other, though we know not what. Again, were any doctrine laid down, which we clearly saw to be self-contradictory, or otherwise absurd, that could never be an object of our faith. For there is no possibility of admitting, upon any authority, a thing for true, which we evidently perceive to be false. Nor would calling such doctrines mysterious mend the matter in the least. For indeed there is no mystery in them : they are as plain, as any in nature ; as plainly contrary to truth, as any thing else is agreeable to it.

But if our assent be required to a proposition, which hath some meaning and no inconsistency in it, and is undeniably asserted in a revelation well proved : but only we have no other evidence for it ; nor should of ourselves ever have imagined any such thing, indeed should have thought it very unlikely ; and still cannot thoroughly comprehend it ; or discover, or so much as guess at, the reasons, the manner, the circumstances, of what we are taught : all this is absolutely no foundation for disbelieving it. Nay, though we should see difficulties and objections against it, which we could not particularly answer, we should allow them only their proper weight : which may be far overbalanced by the general attestations given of its divine authority.

For that God is able to communicate many important truths to us, which we have no means of knowing otherwise, concerning his own nature, his designs and dispensations, concerning the inhabitants of the invisible world, and our future state in it, can no more be doubted, than whether we ourselves, according to our various knowledge of men and things, are able to give unexpected and serviceable notices one to another. And that we should understand nothing farther of his secrets than is unfolded to us, nor be capable of answering many questions, that may be asked about them, otherwise than by confessing our ignorance, is so far from being a plea against their being really his, that it is a necessary consequence of it : so far from being strange in supernatural things, that it is common in natural ones. In several articles of revealed religion, we believe things of which we know not the manner or the reasons. But is it there alone, that we do so ? In the whole of God's creation, what do we meet with, that is not, more or

less, of the same sort? We know not the essence of our own mind, nor the precise distinctions of its several faculties: and why then should we hope to comprehend, or deny because we cannot comprehend, the personal characters, which, we are told, exist in the substance of the Godhead? We know not, how *the soul and flesh is one man*: what wonder if we know not, how *God and man is one Christ* *? We are ignorant how the vicissitudes of day and night, summer and winter, are produced: how the fruits of the earth nourish us: how bodies cohere, or impel each other: how our several sensations are performed: how we move an hand or an eye, though it is our own doing. Familiar as these things are; the manner of them, when examined to the bottom, hath obscurities, which the most learned will never penetrate. *I beheld, saith the preacher, all the work of God,—that is done under the sun. Though a man labour to seek it out, yet shall he not find it: yea farther, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able* †. Surely then we may content ourselves to act in matters of faith, as in those of sense: and believe what we do understand, the thing itself in general; though many circumstances remain, which we understand not, and therefore are not required to believe any thing in relation to them ‡.

Again: in the frame of nature and the scheme of providence we discern indeed evident proofs of wisdom and goodness: but with innumerable particulars intermixed, which we perceive not to be at all useful, or the creation any way the better for them. Yet we never think of excepting these from amongst the works of God: never doubt of their having a real, though unknown, subserviency to valuable ends. Why, just so in the gospel-revelation: look upon the general plan, and it is undeniably adapted to promote the divine honour, and human virtue and happiness: but how some points are conducive to them, we see less clearly, or perhaps not at all. Yet still, as they are parts of a system confessedly good, and clearly proved; and we cannot expect to comprehend all the secret connexions and references in God's moral government of us, which extends to eternity, and may extend to worlds far out of our sight;

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* *Ath. Creed.*† *Eccl. viii. 17.*

‡ *Ubi igitur aut qualis est ista mens? [divina] ubi tua, aut qualis? potesne dicere? An si omnia ad intelligendum non habeo, quæ habere vellem? ne illis quidem, quæ habeo, mihi per te uti licebit? Cic. Tusc. Dissp. 1. 28.*

it is unreasonable beyond expression, to refuse believing any thing, till we know the ground of every thing: and to deny that implicit faith to our Maker in some few instances, which we are obliged in so many to have in one another. Scornful rejection of doctrines, that have all the outward marks of his authority, merely because we cannot investigate the inward reasons or complete scheme of them, would be shocking irreverence in the highest of his creatures: and much worse doth it become our low rank of being, and the lamentable weakness of our degenerate faculties. *Hardly do we guess aright at things, that are upon earth; and with labour do we find the things, that are before us: but the things that are in heaven, who hath searched out? And thy counsel who hath known, except thou give wisdom, and send thy Holy Spirit from above*.*

Further yet: should a revelation contain assertions, that appear in themselves unlikely; and liable to objections, that we are at a loss how to solve: even this, though perhaps it might justly in certain cases, weaken our assent, yet would by no means be sufficient to prevent or destroy it. Some difficulties may perplex us, merely for want of the knowledge, that other men have. Some subjects, as far as we can judge, have difficulties on every possible supposition: which therefore, lying equally against all, cannot be urged against any one in particular: for something must be true. Many points, which our own reason proves to us, for example, concerning the attributes of God, natural and moral, are embarrassed with perplexities belonging to them, as hard to be unravelled, as any thing that scripture teaches, on these or any other heads. Indeed whenever a finite mind hath an infinite object before it; or one, which, though limited, is too large for its grasp, the most accurate arguments upon it, will thwart one another. Throughout the material world are facts, of which, on proper testimony, we are very justly persuaded, though we cannot answer half the objections, that a subtle reasoner may bring against them. Concerning the free actions of our own minds, doubts have been raised, which, I believe, no man pretends he can remove. In the wisest conduct of any worldly affair, steps may be taken, for which they can never account, who are acquainted with it only in part. And surely much less ought we to think of having the

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* Wild. ix. 16.

nature and the ways of God brought down to our poor apprehensions. Not that every seeming difficulty in religion, or in revelation, is a real one. Some persons have made things darker, than they are : others have wanted to make them clearer, than they can be : and between them, unmeaning words, and unwarrantable notions, have been added to those of scripture : which hath thus been charged with what it never meant to say. But we own, after these mistakes are rectified, there will be room for plausible suggestions against some of its doctrines. And they should neither be dissembled on one hand, nor exaggerated on the other : such weight as they have, when those abatements from it have been made, which the considerations now mentioned to you require, should be fairly allowed them. But then the various evidences of the gospel should be allowed their weight also : and whoever doth that honestly, will never reject it, or any article of it.

Some indeed, who are far from rejecting it on the whole, fancy however, that they do it service by interpreting the mysterious parts of it in such a manner, as will reduce them to the level of our conceptions : and so are free in wresting holy writ from its obvious meaning, to fix upon it what they deem a more rational one. Now certainly a single expression, or even a number of scattered expressions, must not always be taken in the most rigid sense. The nature of the thing, the genius of the language, the custom of the writer, his context, the general scope of his doctrine, and of theirs with whom his may be fitly compared, in short, all just rules of judging ought to be called in, to settle the import of any difficult passage : and nothing more built on a few words, than can be well supported ; especially no article, that is at once of great consequence and improbable. But still there is an opposite extreme, too frequent, and very dangerous, of explaining things away. The sacred authors are not to have a forced construction put upon them, to make them suit our notions the better : but we must examine impartially what they really deliver ; and take it as it is, with the difficulties belonging to it. For though the attempt of altering the scheme of revelation, in order to defend it, may be a well-meant officiousness, it is an irreverent, an unjustifiable, and will be an unsuccessful one. Giving up as indefensible, what is truly scriptural, is so far casting off scripture : and unbelievers will refute our interpretations, and take advantage of our concessions : whereas, keeping close to the plan of God's word,

word, we need not fear maintaining our ground. The disputed articles were doubtless made parts of it for wise motives: for many, in all likelihood, which we see not; and for some, which we do see. Our life on earth is a state of trial. Many things try, how we conduct our affections: why may not some be placed in our way for the moral exercise of our understandings? Thus we shall have an opportunity of shewing, whether, on the one hand, we will idly neglect employing our reason at all, or, on the other, presumptuously exalt it against our Maker; or whether, avoiding both errors, we will carefully use our own faculties, and duly respect his omniscience. By adhering to this medium, the first christians preserved the doctrine of the gospel in such purity, that *Irenæus* writes concerning them thus: *Neither will the most able man, who presides in the church, say other than thus; (for no one is above his master) nor the weakest diminish any thing from what hath been delivered. For the faith being one and the same: neither he, that can say much about it, adds to it; nor he, that can say little, takes away* *.

III. The last rule, implied in the text, is, that we should allow every divine truth its due influence on our behaviour. For we are to learn them, *that we may do all the words of this law*.

Indeed merely *receiving the truth in the love of it* † is a moral act: and in some cases may be one of great virtue. Whence our Saviour saith of St. Thomas; *blest are they, that have not seen, and yet have believed* ‡: blessed in proportion to the integrity of their judgment, not the positiveness of their persuasion. But scarce will it be found, that any article of faith is proposed for the probation of this only. Each hath its practical consequences, either flowing of necessity from it, or built with propriety upon it. In proportion as we *know God*, we are to *glorify him as God* §: according to every particular, which the scripture hath manifested concerning him. And the several obligations, incumbent on us, towards him, ought not to be estimated, however commonly they are, by their influence on the affairs of our present life, but by the stress, which he, who alone knows the proper one, hath laid upon them.

* Iren. l. i. c. 3. al. 10.

† 2 Thess. ii. 20.

‡ John xx. 29.

§ Rom. i. 21.

them. Our performance of these obligations, as it was the true motive to the delivery of each article, is the just measure of our belief in it. If we know enough of the mysterious doctrines in religion, to fulfil those duties, of which they are each respectively the foundation, our knowledge, however imperfect, is sufficient. And if those duties remain unfulfilled, the completest knowledge will not avail us. Nor indeed will the completest practice of such duties alone: for we must *do all the words of God's law* *: and the plainer any part of it is, the less excusable the neglect of it will be. Our first and most evident, and therefore strongest obligations are to the dictates of our inward nature. Other things are necessary for such as have the means of being acquainted with them. But these lie within the reach of all men; and all should observe them preferably to whatever can be matter of dispute. Living agreeably to clear rules is the method of obtaining light into those, which are obscure. For, *if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God* †: whereas it is no wonder, that they, who *put away a good conscience, concerning faith make shipwreck* ‡. Or however orthodox any man's belief may be, if his life be bad, as he fails in one essential part of answering the design of the gospel, he must fail of the rewards, and incur the punishments of it.

But, though every instance of christian behaviour will be indispensably required of those, who make profession of christianity: yet one deserves particular mention, since the apostle hath mentioned it particularly in relation to the present subject. *Though I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith,—and have no charity, I am nothing* §. Now this virtue is a very comprehensive one: but so far as it belongs peculiarly to the matter before us, it consists in disposing us to gentle treatment of those who differ from us in points of speculation, and of consequent practice; especially when such points are either doubtful in themselves, or perplexed by the arts of controversy, or when men are unfitted by involuntary prejudices to judge rightly concerning them. We must indeed think as we apprehend reason and scripture to direct us, both of the importance of things, and the conduct of men. On
proper

* Duet. xxvii. 26.

† John vii. 17.

‡ 1 Tim. i. 19.

§ 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

proper occasions too our opinion must be declared. We are by no means to acknowledge, either in our words or actions, those for sound believers, whom we conceive not to be such: nor to show indifference about doctrines, which appear to us of moment to the salvation of mankind. Errors may proceed from as blameable a temper, and produce as mischievous effects, as the grossest immoralities. And we may deem and pronounce a man's condition to be dangerous on account of his errors; yet have the truest good-will and compassion for him; nay, and the highest regard in other respects.

But if we are hasty in suspecting, or unfair or only rigorous in interpreting, vehement or artful in censuring, or inwardly pleased with thinking harshly: then begins that inhuman sin of uncharitableness; against which we ought to guard ourselves, by recollecting every circumstance, that can make in favour of our brethren. Sometimes men appear to differ, when they do not: or to differ much more widely, than they do: their expressions vary strangely, and perhaps are quite opposite; when, had they but coolness and clearness enough to understand one another, they mean, at least very nearly, the same thing. And this consideration should induce us to interpret with candor the words of those, who may appear to depart from the established doctrines: but then surely they in return ought to interpret with at least equal candor the forms, in which the established doctrines are, and long have been, professed in the church of Christ. But farther: though a person may be in a palpable error, possibly it may be such, as no exceedingly bad consequences will attend: or though the article be important, it may not be essential. Or, however fundamental he may err in one point, he may agree with us in all or most others; nay, be as zealous for them, as we are: and some kind notice ought to be taken of that.

Besides, let his errors reach to ever so many and material points; yet, to make him personally criminal in any considerable degree, he must not only have had such means of information, as are strictly speaking, sufficient; but his rejection of those means, or failure of being influenced by them, must have arisen from a worse cause, than mere human fallibility, or such inattention and prepossession as are incident to the better sort of minds. For when these alone mislead him, he hath good ground surely for an humble hope, that his gracious Maker
will

will not impute to him for sin, the faults of which he was ignorantly guilty. Still the mistakes, even of such a one, may be greatly detrimental to society, to virtue, to religion: and therefore the public warning of general denunciations against them, may both be useful and requisite, and such denunciations are far from deserving to be condemned as uncharitable. But then they must be understood, like most other general expressions, with due limitations. And, before we can apply them to particular persons, there are so many unknown circumstances to be taken into the account, and so many allowances to be made, which, without seeing into the heart, cannot be made justly, that the rational, as well as christian, rule is, not to *judge another man's servant*. Our concern is, to believe and act right, ourselves: as for those around us, *to their own master they stand or fall*, and we should be very backward to cast those out, whom perhaps *God will receive* *. Or, however bad an opinion we may conceive any peculiar aggravations oblige us to entertain of their future condition in the next world; or, however necessary we may judge it, *after a first and second admonition to reject* † them from communion with us; we are bound by the most sacred ties, neither to do them any private, nor procure them any public, injury or hardship; but use them with all possible prudent mildness and tenderness: which is likely to reclaim them if any thing can: and should it not, they will surely remain objects of pity, as well as dislike.

These are the rules, which plainly suit our present state of imperfection. And may the careful observation of them bring us all safely to a better: wherein, *that which is perfect being come, that which is in part shall be done away*. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now we know in part; but then shall we know as also we are known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity ‡.

Rom. xiv. 3, 4.

† Tit. iii. 10.

‡ 1 Cor. xiii. 10, 12, 13.

S E R M O N LXXXIII.

OUR SAVIOUR'S COMMAND TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE
WORLD, AND THE RATIONAL MANNER OF ITS PROPAGATION.

MATTH. xxviii. 19, 20.

*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the
name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have command-
ed you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of
the world. Amen.*

THESE words contain that great commission and charter,
granted by our Saviour to his apostles and their successors,
by virtue of which we and all mankind have been called to the
knowledge and practice of true religion, enforced by the mo-
tives of eternal felicity or misery. As it had been chiefly in
Galilee, that he instructed his disciples before his death: so he
appointed them to retire thither after his resurrection, that he
might add to his instructions whatever then became proper;
and more fully acquaint them with such things, as *pertained to
the kingdom of God**. There, our Evangelist informs us, he
appeared to them on a mountain: perhaps the same, on which
he had begun to open the doctrine of christianity, in that noble
discourse, which we have in the fifth and following chapters of
this gospel; and given them a specimen of his and their future
glory, at his transfiguration†. *When they saw him the gener-
ality immediately worshipped him: but some, we are told with
the usual fairness of the sacred writers, doubted*‡. Whether
these were only persons, who accompanied the apostles, and

VOL. II.

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had

* Acts i. 3. † Grot. in Loc. faith, There is ancient tradition for
the last. See Reland Palæst. p. 334, &c. ‡ v. 17.

had not yet seen him since he rose again : or whether some of the apostles themselves, who might not with certainty know him at a distance, is not clear. But the doubts of either could not but vanish, when *Jesus came up* to them, as St. *Matthew* assures us he did, for so the original word signifies*, and conversed familiarly with them. Many such conversations he held with these his followers : for St. *Luke* in their acts informs us, that they continued *forty days*†. But the substance of them all must be, what the text expresses : where, in consequence of that fullness of *power*, which he tells them in the foregoing words, was *given him* over all things *in heaven and in earth*; as the Father had sent him, he sends them‡, to make disciples, for that is the more accurate rendering§, not of the Jews alone, but of *all nations*. And that they may do it rightely and effectually, he distinctly sets forth,

I. The doctrines, they were to teach.

II. The duties, they were to enjoin.

III. The protection and happiness, of which they might assure, both themselves, and all those, who faithfully preached his gospel, and who sincerely embraced it.

I. The doctrines they were to teach. These are briefly, but sufficiently, comprehended in the direction of *baptizing men in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost* : for the better understanding of which phrase, it will be proper to explain,

1. What is meant by being *baptized in the name* of any one, and particularly of these three.

2. What is the faith in these three, which our baptism requires us to profess.

1. For the completer apprehension of the former of these points, it will be useful to observe, that in our Saviour's days, it had been an ancient custom amongst the Jews, when any Gentile forsook idolatry, and believed the law of *Moses*, to receive him into their religion, amongst other ceremonies, by baptism : as indeed they had themselves been prepared for the reception

* Προσελθων, v. 18.

† Acts i. 3.

‡ John xx. 21.

§ Μαθητευω is not used in the Septuagint : nor Μαθητης. In the New Testament it is found thrice, besides in the text : and signifies to make disciples, Acts xiv. 21. to be a disciple, Matth. xxvii. 57. and in the passive voice may signify, to be made a disciple, Matth. xiii. 52. It signifies also in Plutarch, to be a disciple. See Steph. in Voc.

reception of that law, by a solemn and religious washing, as we read *Exod. xix.* Nay even the heathens made use of purifications by water, when they initiated, or entered, any one into the mysteries of their deities. And this rite being not only thus universally used, but also naturally expressive of those two things, which, on professing christianity, chiefly wanted to be expressed: a promise, on our part, carefully to preserve ourselves pure, from the defilement of sin, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit; and a promise, on God's part, graciously to consider us, as pure from the guilt of it, through the merits of his Son: therefore our blessed Lord condescended to make this the form of entering into his religion also. But at the same time, he thoroughly distinguished the christian baptism, both from that of the heathens, who were baptized into superstitions and idolatrous follies; and from that of the Jewish proselytes, who were baptized, as the apostle expresses it, into *Moses**, by directing that his followers should be *baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

In the language of scripture, doing any thing in the name of God, signifies doing it by virtue of his authority. Thus our Saviour saith to the Jews, *I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: If another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive†.* In this sense baptism is administered in the name of the Holy Trinity, being a divine appointment, with a distinct reference to each of the three persons. And in this sense the phrase appears to have been used by *St. Peter*, when he commanded the family of *Cornelius* to be baptized in the name of the Lord‡; that is, by virtue of his commission to baptize all nations. Till that day, the apostles had understood this only concerning Jews and proselytes of all nations. But now, *St. Peter* being sent by express revelation to *Cornelius*, a Gentile; and perceiving, in the midst of his discourse to him and his friends, that, on their believing, *the Holy Ghost was fallen upon them§*, Gentiles as they were: after some astonishment, he argues very justly, *can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost, as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord||*: that is, in pursuance of our Saviour's general direction.

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But

* 1 Cor. x. 2.
17. 47, 48.

† John v. 43.

‡ Acts x. 48.

§ v. 44.

But though the expression in the text undoubtedly implies this meaning, yet it comprehends a further one. For the phrase translated *IN the name*, is different from that in the passage relating to St. Peter, and signifies in strictness, *INTO the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, which word, *into*, the New Testament uses nine times besides*, in speaking of baptism, whereas it uses a word signifying, *in*, at most, but once besides. The particular import of this term, I shall now explain to you.

It hath ever been usual, that the believers or professors of any doctrine should be called by a name, derived from the first or chief teacher of that doctrine. And by whatever form or ceremony they declared themselves his disciples, by the same they were understood to take upon them his name. Thus the Jews, when, taking *Moses* for their prophet and guide, they followed him into the midst of the Red Sea, are said by St. Paul, in allusion to the water through which they passed, to have been *baptized into Moses*†: which is equivalent to saying, that they were baptized into the name of *Moses*. Not that in fact the Jews called themselves by his name, as the several sects of philosophers did by the names, of their several leaders. For the doctrine, which *Moses* taught, was not his own: and the obedience, which he required, was not to himself; but to God, the maker of heaven and earth. And therefore, when the Jews were thus baptized into *Moses*, they were at the same time, in a much higher sense, baptized into the name of God: taking that upon them, as an acknowledgement of their being his: for servants are known by the name of their Lord. In scripture therefore God himself styles them, *my people, which are called by my name*‡. And they plead with him, *we are called by thy name, leave us not*§: and elsewhere declare, *all people will walk every one in the name of his god: and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever*||. As then the Moabites were called by the name of their god, the people of *Chemosh*¶; and the other idolatrous nations in like manner; so were the Israelites called by the true God. And whoever

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* Acts viii. 16. xix. 3, 5. Rom. vi. 3. 1 Cor. i. 13, 15. x. 2. xii. 13.

Gal. iii. 27. † 1 Cor. x. 2. ‡ 2 Chr. vii. 14. § Jer. xiv. 9.

In the Hebrew it is, *thy name is called over us*.

|| Mic. iv. 5.

¶ Numb. xxi. 29. Jer. xlviii. 46.

by baptism, amongst other ceremonies, professed himself a convert to Judaism, he was, properly speaking, baptized into the same name.

When therefore the christian religion was published; as profelytes to the old dispensation had been baptized into *Moses*, taking him for their lawgiver and instructor: so believers in the new were baptized into Christ, receiving him for their Lord and Master. And as the former were in effect baptized into the name of the one true God, assuming the denomination of his servant: so the latter, being more fully instructed concerning the object of worship, were professedly and in form *baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost*: taking this name upon them, to believe in and obey for the future, as their badge of distinction from all other men. Whence our Saviour, in his prayer for his disciples, saith to the Father, *while I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me**. And in his exhortation to the angel of the church of *Pergamos*, he saith, *thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith†*.

It must be acknowledged indeed, that being baptized into the name of these three, is no where expressly mentioned, except in the text. But then the more usual phrase, of being baptized into Christ, or into his name, amounts to just the same thing. For by bearing the name of christians, we declare ourselves believers, not in Christ alone; but in the Father, *of whom*, to use the apostle's words, *the whole family in heaven and earth is named‡*; and in the Holy Spirit also: whose name appears evidently never to have been omitted in baptism, from that remarkable passage§, where some professors of the gospel owning that they were intirely ignorant concerning the Holy Ghost, St. Paul asks them, *unto what then were ye baptized?* And finding it was only *into the baptism of John*, commands them to be now baptized, *into the name of the Lord Jesus¶*. So it is expressed: but the foregoing question fully proves, that the name of the Holy Ghost was used likewise: from whence it follows, that the expression, *baptizing into the name of Christ*, wherever we find it in scripture, is only put for shortness: and

* John xvii. 11, 12.

† Rev. ii. 13.

‡ Eph. iii. 15.

§ Acts xix. 1, 2, 3.

¶ v. 3, 4, 5.

and that the original form of baptism was, *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*: which accordingly was the constant one in the primitive church,

You see then, upon the whole, that as being *baptized into John's* baptism, was taking his name, and being called his disciple: and as being *baptized into the name of Paul*, (a supposition, which he himself puts*) would have been setting him up as our chief leader and master: so when the scripture speaks of being *baptized into the name of Christ*, the meaning is, that we avow believing and following him: and when, more fully, *into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*, it signifies, that we are received into the number of those, who profess, and desire to be known by the character of professing, faith and duty towards the ever-blessed Trinity.

2. But wherein more particularly this faith, which is the foundation of duty, consists; and what are the great articles of it, is the second point, on which I proposed to speak: and these things not being explicitly taught in the form of baptism singly, must be learned from the rest of scripture in conjunction with it, and professed in proportion as they are learned. Now the scripture expressly asserts, in perfect conformity with reason, that there is but one God, the object of our faith and adoration: not one supreme, and other inferior ones, as the heathens believed, but one alone. *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord†: Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve‡. I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God besides me§: I am the Lord, that is my name, and my glory will I not give to another||*, saith he himself. Accordingly St. Paul declares, that *to us christians, there is one God the Father, of whom are all things¶*. But then, besides the several orders of created beings, the same scripture as expressly mentions his eternal Son and Spirit: the one begotten of him, the other proceeding from him. The distinct and full meaning of these terms we know not: but this, however, they plainly denote, that the Son and Spirit are derived from the Father, in a manner, whatever it be, each different from the other,

* 1 Cor. i. 13.

† Deut. vi. 4.

‡ Deut. vi. 13. Matth. iv. 4.

§ 1st. xlv. 5.

|| 1st. xlii. 8.

¶ 1 Cor. viii. 6.

other, and both different from creation. Accordingly we find ascribed to both these, not only the names, but the perfections of God, with honours and worship incommunicable to any creature : and while they are evidently distinguished from the Father, they are as evidently described as being one with him. Wherein precisely this union and this distinction lies, the scripture hath not said, and therefore we cannot say, any farther than this : that the union appears to be, not only a similitude of will, or of other powers and dispositions, but the highest possible sameness of essential attributes and properties ; for which reason it hath been called an unity of essence, nature or substance : and the distinction appears to be, not only a difference of names, or of relations to created beings, but of subsistence and action, resembling in some measure, as described in holy writ, that of different human agents : on which account it is said to be a distinction of persons. And from all these things put together, we conclude, that we are to believe and worship three persons, who are one God.

Many other words and terms there are, besides these, which have been used in speaking of this great mystery : some of them proper and useful, serving to express only what the scripture expresses, and to guard it against misrepresentations ; which therefore we should ever interpret candidly and favourably : others, much better omitted ; as indeed all are, that men employ to give any farther knowledge of the subject, than God hath given. For in such cases, but in this above any, the true method is, to receive, with the utmost humility and simplicity of mind, what is revealed : neither adding, nor diminishing, nor one way or other attempting to make it, either clearer, or darker, than it is. The former we cannot do : the latter we easily may, but surely should not wish to do. Multiplying therefore phrases and reasonings, either to determine what the divine oracles have not determined, or to explain away what they have determined, is on both hands wrong ; and hath often led very great men into unhappy errors, and very good men into fierce contentions : all which might be avoided, would they but be so modest, as neither to doubt of what the All-wise hath taught, nor pry into what he hath concealed ; and so charitable, as never without the strongest reason to think ill of others, and never for any reason do or wish ill to them.

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There are certainly, in this wonderful doctrine, many things, concerning which, questions may be asked, which we can only answer by confessing our ignorance: and some things, against which objections may be raised, that we can solve no otherwise, than by reminding those, who make them, that such difficulties must be expected, whenever a finite mind attempts to view an infinite object. But, though, in the Holy Trinity, there is much, that can by no means be comprehended fully; which is what we intend to say, by calling it *mysterious*, or above reason; (as indeed almost every thing is, in part, above ours:) yet, in what the scripture requires us to believe concerning the Holy Trinity, there is nothing, which either cannot be at all understood; or which, when understood, is absurd and contrary to reason. Now whatever possibly may be true, we are bound, when a revelation, well attested, plainly teaches it, to believe actually is true. For faith in what God affirms, is unquestionably as necessary, as obedience to what he enjoins. And, little as we can see in matters of this high nature, we may notwithstanding sufficiently see very important motives for his injunction of faith in this doctrine: because from the distinction of persons in the Trinity, there arises a farther distinction of their relations to us, on which relations are founded distinct duties on our parts towards them; and very different from what they would be, if two of them were only creatures of exalted rank. The whole substance of christianity is comprehended in considering, and accordingly honouring, (to express it in the well-known words of our catechism) *God the Father*, as him, *who hath made us and all the world*; *God the Son*, as him, *who hath redeemed us and all mankind*: *God the Holy Ghost*, as him, *who sanctifieth us and all the elect people of God*. Not but that each person concurs in each of these works: but still, finding in scripture, that one is represented as more peculiarly and eminently concerned in one of them, and another in another; we justly distinguish the Father, Son, and Spirit, by the distinct offices of Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; and justly express the distinction in our prayers and praises, as well as in our creed.

Thus, in the revelation of St. *John*, the saints above adore the person of the Father in the first of these characters. *And the four and twenty elders fell down before him that sat on the*
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the throne, and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever,—saying, thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power: for thou hast created all things; and for thy pleasure they are, and were created. We therefore on earth, in like manner ought to worship, and fall down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker†: to whom we farther owe peculiar thanksgivings on this account, that he according to the counsel of infinite wisdom, was the original cause of our redemption. For in this was manifested the love of God towards us, that he sent his only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him‡. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope§. But the actual accomplishment of this great design was the unspeakably gracious work of the second person, whom therefore we call our Redeemer, and address with devotions appropriated to his office. This in the very next chapter of the same book of Revelation, we are told by St. John: *The four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, and sung a new song, saying, thou art worthy—for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.—And I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne,—saying with a loud voice, worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, heard I, saying, blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him, that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever||. In this universal acclamation of praise, our hearts ought to join with the humblest gratitude: to reverence him continually as the Lord of all¶; and in particular, besides the holy ordinance of baptism, to celebrate with the devoutest affection, that other solemn rite, which he hath instituted, commanding us, *this do in remembrance of me***. The distinct office of the third person, the Spirit, hath consisted from the beginning, first in revealing and confirming the truths of religion to men from age to age, till the knowledge of them was completed in the New Testament; for *holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy***

VOL. II.

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Ghost

* Rev. iv. 10, 11. † Ps. xciv. 6. ‡ 1 John iv. 9. § 1 Pet. i. 3.
 ¶ Rev. v. 8, 9, 11, 12, 13. ¶ Acts x. 36. ** Luke xxiii. 19.

*Ghost**: then in disposing their minds, by the outward ministry of the word, and the inward workings of his grace, to receive and obey them: giving those, who comply with his motions, strength against temptation, comfort under affliction, fervency in prayer, growth in goodness, reviving hope, and sometimes joyful assurance, of divine favour: All which operations tending wholly to improve us in piety and virtue, which together make up true sanctity or holiness, he is accordingly styled the Sanctifier. And our duty to him plainly is, to be thankful to him for what he hath done, and pray for what he is ready to do, towards our salvation; never to *grieve† or do despite to‡ him* by wilful sin or negligence; but to learn from his instructions, and yield to his influences, that he may abide with us for ever, and make us, as the apostle expresses himself, *temples of the Holy Ghost§*.

* 2 Pet. i. 21.

† Eph. iv. 30.

‡ Heb. x. 29.

§ 1 Cor. vi. 19.

SERMON LXXXIV.

OUR SAVIOUR'S COMMAND TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE
WORLD, AND THE RATIONAL MANNER OF ITS PROPAGATION.

MATTH. xxviii. 19, 20.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

IN my former discourse on these words I have shown both what is meant by being baptized *in*, or rather *into the name* of any one, particularly of *the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*; and what faith in them that baptism obliges us to profess: endeavouring so to set forth our christian belief, as neither to decide concerning what is hidden from us, nor to omit what is made known to us. For *the secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed, belong unto us and to our children for ever; that we may do all the words of this law* *. Let us now therefore go on to the practical part of christianity, comprehended under the

Second branch of the text, in which our Saviour directs his apostles, what duties they are to enjoin men, in consequence of their faith. *Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you.*

Now of these, our duties to the several persons of the Holy Trinity are so closely connected with our faith in them, that I thought it most natural to mention them together. And of the rest, it would be impossible at present to specify every one in particular. And therefore I shall only treat of the more

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general

* Daet. xxix. 29.

general heads and divisions of them. By this commission of our blessed Lord then, the ministers of the gospel are bound to teach, and the professors of the gospel to observe, the precepts of piety, as well as morality; of revealed religion, as well as natural; difficult, as well as easy duties; those of self-government, as well as of social behaviour; *all things whatsoever he hath commanded*, and nothing else.

I. Precepts of piety, as well as morality. In some ages of the world the generality of persons, and in all too many, have almost entirely disregarded virtue, at least some parts of it, while yet they seemed very zealous in religion. That the *religion of such is vain* *, requires little proof. Indeed it must be, either mere pretence, or gross mistake. Either they have really none of that devotion, which they profess, or it is devotion to an † *unknown God*. For did they at all apprehend his nature aright; the love of him could not but incline them to the love of whatever was good; and the fear of him could not but deter them from whatever was evil. These things are so easily demonstrable, and the mischiefs of not attending to them have been so dreadful; that wherever knowledge and liberty have prevailed, such wrong notions of duty to our Maker have (amongst the more considerable part of the world at least.) quickly fallen into the contempt and hatred, which they well deserve. But then, as it is natural for the warmth of men to carry them too far; and the thoughtlessness of men to confound matters, which should be distinguished: so, in our times, most unhappily, multitudes have run from one extreme to another; and, not discerning the difference between two of the unlikest things in the world, when well compared, false religion and true, have, in a great measure, if not absolutely, rejected both together. Declaring in general the highest honour for virtue, they slight and even ridicule piety: the inward feeling of it, under the name of enthusiasm; the outward marks of it, under that of superstition. Yet plainly, if sentiments of duty and affection to our fellow creatures be necessary ingredients in a good character: want of them towards our Creator, must (where means of instruction are afforded) be a certain argument of a bad one. And, if our regards to our fellow-creatures ought to be shown by visible tokens, not only that they may

* James i. 26.

† Acts xvii. 23.



may be sensible of our proper dispositions, but that by exercising them we may improve in them, and others be excited to imitation: then our reverence to our Creator ought likewise to be manifested openly; because, though he sees the devout thoughts, that lie hid in our hearts, yet, by expressing them, we shall both strengthen them in ourselves, and set an useful example to those around us. Indeed the connection of religious duties with moral is so very close, that, as the religion of those is always false, who think meanly of virtue: so the virtue of those is never uniformly, if at all, true, who think meanly of religion. For the belief of a God, who observes and will recompense, being in all cases the greatest, and in some the only, support of right conduct: they, who either disbelieve or disregard him, must frequently fall into wrong conduct, amidst the various temptations of life. And the truth is, the generality of those amongst them, who talk the most of virtue, appear to concern themselves very little farther about it, than to oppose it, in their talk, to religion. Such indeed cannot be really, in any degree, serious. But many who, in some respects, are such, and imagine they are in all, would assuredly find, on a careful examination, that they are dangerously deficient in this respect: and that cultivating and exerting dutiful affection to the author of their being, is not only in itself *the first and great commandment*, but hath a most powerful influence on the practice of that *second*, which *is like unto it* *, and of every other human obligation.

II. We are bound to observe the precepts of revealed religion, as well as natural. That God can make known to us many truths, of which we were ignorant, though greatly interested in them, will not surely be doubted: for we can make known such very often one to another. And that from these truths corresponding rules of behaviour may flow, is equally plain. Those relations and duties therefore to our Redeemer and to our Sanctifier, which the holy scripture alone discovers to us, are not, on that account, at all the less real, than those to our Creator, of which reason informs us. Further: as God is the sovereign of the world, there is no more room for question, whether, under the general laws of his moral kingdom, he may not establish, from time to time, particular and different institutions

* Matth. xxii. 37 &c.

institutions and forms of religion; than whether, under the general laws of human society, earthly sovereigns may not establish particular and different institutions and forms of government. And lastly: as God knows perfectly well, both the nature of our circumstances, and the proper method of treating us; that he may possibly have very important motives for some of his appointments, of which motives we can discern scarce any thing, is much more certain, than that a wise man, well acquainted with any affair, may perceive many steps to be fitting in relation to it, which a weak man, uninstructed in it, doth not.

Whatever precepts then are contained in revelation, since none of them, rightly understood, are contrary to reason, it is our indispensable duty to observe them, though ever so implicitly, *walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless* *. We know not what we do, when we reject or slight any one of them: only this we know, that we disobey that authority, which enjoins the whole: a consideration, worthy of being laid seriously to heart by all those, (for too many there are,) who, either presumptuously, or thoughtlessly, neglect or depreciate some of the institutions of christianity, while they profess to reverence others; and, as any shadow of argument, or groundless imagination leads them, determine with themselves, that this they will do, that they will not; this they will look on as a matter of moment, that as a trifle. It cannot be, that any of the laws of Christ, our Lord and Master, are to be treated thus. And yet some of them are treated thus by such numbers, (who, notwithstanding call themselves by his name,) that they must be mentioned in particular.

The sacrament of baptism, the leading part of our Saviour's commission in the text, is not indeed thrown off, but frequently attended with scarce common seriousness. The obligation of parents and masters to *bring up* those under their care *in the nurture and admonition of the Lord* †, is both cruelly and unwisely forgotten. The apostolical and very useful ordinance of confirmation, is too often omitted, and still oftener considered as an empty form: private devotion practised, it may be feared, by very few, at least with any attention: pious reading and meditation by fewer still: family prayer almost entirely
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* Luke i. 6.

† Eph. vi. 4.

laid aside: and the public service of God, by some avowedly scorned, by others, both thought and spoken of with a contemptuous indifference; as if it might well be left to fancy and chance, when and how often, or whether almost at all, they should condescend to join in that worship of him who made them, which himself hath prescribed. The day, which he hath directed to be kept holy, is lamentably, and in many places openly, profaned, not only by the omission just mentioned, but by needless worldly business, improper diversions, and what is yet worse, intemperance and debauchery. Nay, the far greater part, even of such, as observe other institutions with no small appearance of conscientiousness, astonishingly overlook, in spite of continual admonitions, their Saviour's injunction of commemorating, at the holy table, his dying love, delivered nearly with his dying breath. Experience hath proved to a shocking degree, that in proportion as disregard to duties, peculiarly christian, increases, disregard to all duty increases too: and what the end of it will be (unless through God's grace our timely reformation put a happy end to it) I know not how we can better judge, than by our blessed Lord's own words, which he hath verified so dreadfully on those once shining lights, the churches of *Asia*, to whom they were primarily directed. *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works: else I will come unto thee quickly, and remove thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent* *.

III. Being bound to whatever Christ hath commanded us, we are bound to perform the most laborious and unwelcome, as well as the easiest, of his commands. We may be sure, he hath enjoined us nothing, but what he will make possible, nothing but what he hath a right, nothing but what he hath cause, to enjoin. And therefore, the difficulty of his precepts can never be an excuse for not obeying them. Sometimes this difficulty is but imaginary: and what we apprehend that we cannot do at all, would we but try in a proper manner, we should do with great ease. Sometimes it is real indeed, but of our own creating. Slight inclinations have grown, by indulgence or negligence, into settled habits: wilful wrong conduct hath put obstacles in the way of acting right: and then we think it very grievous, that we must be at pains to bring ourselves

* Rev. ii. 5.

selves out of a condition, that we needed never have brought ourselves into. Or, supposing any virtue originally hard to practise, do we not often obey extremely hard injunctions of men? And why not therefore those of God? Be the labour ever so great; still, both in the nature of the thing, and by the appointment of heaven, no one can become happy, that doth not become good: and no one is truly good, who purposely or negligently lives in the omission of any duty, or commission of any sin. Difficulty is a reason for nothing, but exerting ourselves, and applying to God for help: which whoever doth in earnest, will find opposition serve only to strengthen his christian graces by exercise here, and augment the reward of them for ever hereafter.

IV. We must observe those commands, which relate to the government of ourselves, no less than those which respect our fellow-creatures. Men are strangely apt to run into extremes in this particular. Some, on the merit of their abstinence from unlawful pleasures, venture without scruple to be ill-humoured, hard-hearted, censorious, and unjust; while some again place the whole of a right character in a gay kind of good nature: and, either hurting, as they pretend, nobody but themselves; or, however doing others only such injuries, as they imagine matter of merriment; go almost whatever lengths of sensual gratification their desires prompt them to. Now these latter, far from being the harmless people, which they would have the world think them, usually contribute more, by the unavoidable, and often foreseen, consequences of their vices, and the contagion of their examples, to bring misery into private life, and distress, if not ruin, upon the public, than almost any wicked persons, that can be mentioned besides. But were they, in these respects, ever so innocent: yet our being rational creatures, as indispensably binds us to sobriety, chastity, and decency, as our being social creatures doth to inoffensiveness and beneficence. A mind immersed in voluptuousness, nay filled with amusements and trifles, and attentive to them only or chiefly, is by no means in a moral state, and much less in a religious one. Our evident capacity and formation for higher and better things, cannot but carry with it a proportionable obligation, to the improvement of our understandings in the knowledge of truth, and of our hearts in the esteem of virtue;

to the care of acting worthily and usefully amongst our fellow-creatures, and qualifying ourselves for spiritual happiness with our Creator. Thus much even the light^a of nature will teach us. And if revelation be consulted; there we shall find the strongest cautions, against that fondness for sumptuous living, delicacy, and splendor, which brought the rich man into the place of torment *; against being *lovers of pleasures, more than lovers of God* †. Scriptures, like these, are not designed to drive persons into unnatural rigours and austerities: but they are designed to restrain them from that habit and study of self-indulgence, which being attended perhaps with the commission of no flagrant sins, looks to be an allowable way of consuming time: but indeed brings poor wretches, often by quick degrees, to intire forgetfulness of God and themselves, and extinguishes all attention to what deserves it most. This lethargy of the mind is the great danger of a state of prosperity and affluence: which therefore, as many as are placed in that state, should continually watch against, as being totally contrary to a spirit of religion; and remember, that whoever so *liveth in pleasure*, as to live to it, *is dead while he liveth* ‡: dead to all the purposes of christianity here, and all the hopes of felicity hereafter.

V. Our Saviour's direction, that all nations be *taught to observe* every thing *which he hath commanded*, implies a prohibition of teaching any thing in his name, which he hath not commanded, either personally while on earth, or by the Holy Spirit of truth after his ascension. For where his commission ends, there the powers of those, to whom he gave it, end also. Still, in matters left undetermined, or not fully determined by him, men of knowledge may signify their opinion, men of prudence may suggest their advice, and both are to be regarded in a proper degree. Superiors may likewise interpose their authority, so far as public order and peace require; and, in all things lawful, others are bound to submit to them. But no man, or number of men, may presume to set up their own judgment, or their own will, for a law of Christ: or add a single article, as a necessary one, to that rule of *faith* and practice, which was *once delivered unto the saints* §. Even St. Paul himself

VOL. II.

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* Luke xvi. 19, &c.

† 2 Tim. iii. 4.

‡ 1 Tim. v. 6.

§ Jude v. 3.

hath on one occasion accurately distinguished between what he, and what the Lord in person spoke * ; between points in which he *had* an express commandment, and points in which he *gave his judgment, as one that had obtained mercy to be faithful* † : that is, in the trust of the apostleship. And if such a person was thus careful, much more ought the ministers of religion in these later ages, who can have no certain acquaintance with it, but from his writings and the rest of scripture, be solicitous not to *preach any other gospel, than that they have received* ‡ ; nor *build on the foundation of Jesus Christ*, superstructures that will not abide the trial §, *teaching for doctrines the commandments of men* ¶. They, who assume this power, usurp a dominion over their fellow-servants, to which only their master in heaven hath a right : and they who obey this power, so far *worship God in vain, who hath never required this at their hands* ||.

I have now gone through the second part of the text : the duties, which the apostles and their successors were to enjoin. And therefore I proceed to set before you,

III. The protection and happiness, of which both they who faithfully preach the gospel, and they who sincerely embrace it, may be assured. *Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

Amongst men, chusing to be with any one is not only a natural consequence of having a regard for him, but, on many important occasions, a necessary means of showing that regard to his advantage. In condescension therefore to common language, God, though present every where, is described in holy writ as peculiarly drawing nigh unto, being, and dwelling with, those, who, by a temper and conduct of piety and virtue intitle themselves to his love and fatherly care : whereas he is represented as departing from persons of a contrary character, not vouchsafing to look upon them, or beholding them afar off, till he returns to execute judgment on them. Of this kind is the manner of speech used in the text : where our blessed Lord, being about to leave the world, and go unto the Father, tells his followers, that though his visible and bodily presence was to be withdrawn very soon, he should be still as really present upon

* Gal. i. 9.

† 1 Cor. vii. 10, 12.

‡ 1 Cor. iii. 11, 12, 13.

§ v. 25.

¶ Matth. xv. 9.

|| 1st. i. 12.

upon earth, as ever: not only seeing, but watching, directing, and defending them continually. And therefore, notwithstanding St. *Matthew* thought fit to abstain from subjoining in his gospel any words of his own to these most solemn ones of our Saviour, yet his ascent into heaven is almost as well understood by them, as if it had been expressly related.

This gracious promise was doubtless immediately, and in the first place, made to the apostles. But as the use, for which it was made, is perpetual; and the term, for which it is expressed to be made, cannot possibly be confined to themselves; but must signify either, as we translate it, *to the end of the world*, or *to the end of the gospel age*, which is to last as long as the world; it must necessarily be extended to those, who should at any time succeed the apostles in teaching the faith and duties of christianity. And since the presence of Christ with the teachers of his religion is designed for the benefit of those, who are taught it: therefore all such, in all ages, have a share in the assurance of the text. Accordingly, in many places of scripture, the presence, not only of the Son of God, but of the Father and Holy Spirit, is promised to every true believer without exception, St. *Paul* declares, *if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his* *. And Christ himself declares, *if a man love me,—my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him* †.

If then, as the church of *Rome* pretends, such expressions as these convey a promise of infallibility, or security of not departing from the right faith, to their church, or any person or persons in it; they convey the same to every church, and every person in it. But our Saviour's declaration is, not that any one or more churches may not, if they will, intirely throw off the faith; and even all churches, as well as all men, fall both into many errors and many sins: but that this shall never happen through his forsaking them, but their forsaking him: and that, how great soever the apostacy of the latter times may be, (as St. *Paul* hath foretold it should be a very grievous one ‡;) how much soever at any time the church of Christ may be obscured, it shall never be extinguished: for it must continue to the end of the world, since he hath promised to *be with it* to the end of the world. In different ages he is present to it in differ-

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* Rom. viii. 9.

† John xiv. 23.

‡ Tim. iv. 1

rent manners, as the circumstances of each require. His apostles he directed by inspiration into all truth : and strengthened them with power to work miracles in confirmation of it. When religion, by their means, was known and proved sufficiently, these extraordinary effects of his presence gradually ceased : but those, which remained still needful, were still experienced. And to this day, wherever his ministers teach men to believe and do what he hath commanded, there *he is always with them* : and *wherever two or three of his disciples are gathered together in his name, there he is in the midst of them* * : protecting his whole church, and every member of it, outwardly against their temporal enemies to such a degree, as infinite wisdom sees to be fit ; and inwardly against their spiritual ones, so that nothing, but their own wilful sins and perseverance in them, shall hazard the salvation of any one of them. But so far as men allow themselves to teach, believe, or practise contrary to his commands, they forfeit their title to his gracious presence, which evidently depends on their obedience to those commands. And consequently no set of men in the world have a right to argue, as the *Romanists* would fain do : that Christ hath promised to be with his church for ever ; and therefore their church, or the majority of the whole church, can teach only what he appointed they should. But ours is a very just way of arguing ; that we teach what Christ appointed we should, and therefore we are a part of his church, with which he hath promised to be for ever. For that our doctrines are catholic, however the *Romanists* have stolen the name, we are bold to say, and fully able to prove : on this account we have nothing to fear. Could we but say as much of our lives too, then all were well.

But alas, though they have little cause on comparison to reproach us in this respect, we have much cause to reproach ourselves. The number of professed christians amongst us indeed is large : yet even that is lessening. But the number of such as are truly christians, and behave like christians—What shall we say of this? May God, *who commanded the light to shine out of darkness*, cause the light of his gospel to shine more effectually into the hearts of men†, and brighten the very dark prospect there is before us concerning spiritual matters ; that we may know, at least in
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* Matth xviii. 20.

† 2 Cor. iv. 6.

*this our day, the things which belong to our peace**, our present and future happiness. But what others will do, is for them to consider: and what shall be the consequences of mens doings, is for God to appoint. Let us only look to our own souls; that in the midst of a bad world we be, as we ought, innocent, prudent, and exemplary; that we watch over those, who are under our care, and warn others as we have opportunity; that, by openly professing the gospel of Christ, we encourage the profession of it; and, by adorning our profession with a suitable conduct, do honour to it. Provided we behave thus; let others behave as they please, and the event be what it will to them, and to all, in temporal concerns; to us the final event however shall be good. Christianity began with a very small number: and were it to be reduced to an equally small one again, we might take the same comfort still, which our Saviour gave his disciples at first: *Fear not, little flock: for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom†*. *The kingdoms of this earth* we have cause to hope will yet, in due time, notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, *become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ‡*, in a much ampler manner than they have hitherto been. But the kingdom of heaven, *God, who cannot lie§*, hath, in the plainest terms, promised to the faithful disciples of his Son. And all who have secured his presence with them here, by a life of religion and virtue, shall assuredly reign with him for ever hereafter in those *blessed mansions of his Father's house*, whither he is gone to prepare a place for us, and will come again, and receive us unto himself, that where he is, there we may be also¶.

* Rev. xi. 15.

† Luke xix. 42.

‡ Tit. i. 2.

§ Luke xii. 32.

¶ John xiv. 2, 3.

S E R M O N LXXXV.

ON THE CRUELTY OF TYRANTS, AND THEIR STRIKING
COUNTER-ACTION BY PROVIDENCE.

MATTH. ii. 16.

Then Herod, when he saw, that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth; and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under; according to the time, which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

THE piteous history, contained in these words, is the sequel of that, immediately preceding, which informs us, that, on the birth of our Saviour in *Judea*, some Gentiles of learning and distinction came from the east to *Jerusalem*, by divine direction, to pay him homage: on which, *Herod* the king, understanding that the *Messiah* was to be born at *Bethlehem*, sent them thither to find him; with a charge to bring him notice of the place where the child was, that he also might do him the same honour; designing really to destroy him, instead of paying him respect: but that, *being warned of God, not to return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way**.

The sad consequences which followed their departure, are mentioned in the words of the text; and present to us a transaction of so remarkable a nature as well deserves a particular examination into it, and an explanation of the several circumstances attending it. This is what I mean to give you in the following discourse: and if, in doing it, I should be led to spend more time, in proportion, than usual, on points not immediately

mediately belonging to the great articles of christian faith or practice; you will remember, that we ought to understand, not only the doctrines and precepts, but the history of the gospel: especially as in the present unbelieving age, objections are too frequently made against the several parts of it, in their turns; and as a due consideration of every part, will not only confirm us in the truth of it, but furnish abundantly more matter of pious and moral reflection, than at the first view it may seem to afford.

The text begins with acquainting us, that *Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth.* Not that they had any design of provoking him, or exposing him to contempt. That is not the behaviour of good persons to the very worst. He had commanded them indeed to *bring him word again*, where the child was: but probably had too haughtily presumed on their compliance, though not his subjects, to think of asking a promise of them. Or, had they made one, as they naturally enough might, with a full purpose of keeping it; the warning, received from God, must intirely have superseded that obligation: of which, other things also might have hindred the performance. But unreasonable and vehement spirits hardly ever stay to inquire into such matters: whatever disappoints them, appears to them an indignity. And accordingly *Herod* was not only sorry, that his intention was frustrated, but *exceeding wroth*: imagined it no sin at all to contrive the murder of the harmless child whose birth had been notified to him; but an intolerable offence, that the wise men should, whatever their reason was, fail to be made his instruments for accomplishing it.

And now, his wickedness increasing as his rage boiled within him, rather than miss of committing the one crime, which alone he designed at first, he resolves to commit he knows not how many more of the like sort, without any other pretext for them: imagining that the object of his apprehensions continued still in the same place. On that imagination solely, either having first inquired after him in vain, (for he was removed by the direction of God) or conceiving, that no certain information would be obtained by a person so abhorred as he knew himself to be, and that taking time for a search was giving time for an escape; he forms the shocking resolution of
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killing all the children of *Bethlehem*, and its territory; unmoved by conscience, or compassion, or fear of revenge, or the detestation of mankind, in order to make sure of killing that child, from which, of all others, he ought to have abstained, the long-expected *hope of Israel**, the great promised blessing to that religion, which he himself professed. This direful purpose he orders to be put in immediate execution: too many find their interest in obeying his will: no one hath power, or courage, to resist it: the deed is done: the poor infants miserably slain.

No wonder, that *then*, as *St. Matthew* observes, was fulfilled, that is, verified anew, more eminently and literally, what was spoken originally on a different occasion, by *Jeremy the prophet*, saying: *In Rama*, a town of *Benjamin*, adjoining to *Bethlehem* of *Judah*, which tribes were therefore probably mixed here, as well as at *Jerusalem* and other places; *in Rama*, a voice was heard, lamentation and weeping and great mourning: *Rachel*, the mother of *Benjamin*, weeping, that is, in the persons of her female descendants, for her children; and would not be comforted, because they are not: are not any longer in this world, for a comfort and joy to their friends; but taken away, to their inexpressible affliction, by a stroke of violence, the most unexpected, the most afflicting and desolating, the most exquisitely painful and insupportable, that can be conceived.

Some perhaps may be tempted almost to doubt, whether a human creature be capable of such barbarity. But, alas, we cannot tell, to what degree our own dispositions might be depraved, were we to give ourselves up to iniquity, and provoke a just God to withdraw his grace from us. Much less can we be sure what amazing abominations others may come to harbour within their breasts. *The heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*† But especially the hearts of tyrants, grown old in the possession and exercise of absolute power, accustomed by flattery and pride to think themselves of a higher species than the rest of mankind, hardened to executions and slaughter by long use, become suspicious of every person and thing, by experience of the falsehood of others, and consciousness of their own; and habituated

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* Acts xxviii. 20.

† Jer. xvii. 9.

to hate their subjects, as knowing that they are hated by them. Now such, if ever man was, *Herod* was. His whole history, written not by a christian, but a Jew, fully proves, that no degree of cruelty was improbable concerning one of a nature so savage: who, besides the fierce wars, in which his boundless ambition engaged him, was committing murders in cold blood throughout his life; of his nearest relations amongst others, even his own children; every one of them from motives of state-jealousy, the very inducement that prompted him to the inhumanity charged on him in the text: and was so far from relenting at the approach of death, which commonly inspires less hardened sinners with penitence and mildness, that he caused a large number of his principal subjects to be assembled; and putting them under confinement, bound those about him by an oath, to massacre them all, as soon as he should expire; that the nation might mourn for his decease on that account, which on all others, he knew, would rejoice*. It is in vain to say of such a one, that he shewed on many occasions a great concern for his reputation: and therefore was not likely to commit so monstrous a murder, as that of these children. He did so, when he could gratify his vanity, without prejudicing his imaginary interests: but never else. And therefore his proceeding without mercy in this case, far from being incredible, is only an evidence, that the expectations of the Messiah's coming at that time were great and general; and his own apprehensions of it inexpressibly strong.

But still it may be wondered, if *Herod* was guilty of so execrable a deed, that no ancient historian should record it, and paint it in its due colours, as they have done many things, which deserved it less: but should all, excepting *St. Matthew*, omit the mention of it†. Now, in truth, there is no ancient heathen historian of those times extant, besides *Suetonius*: whose work is only a brief account of the lives of the twelve *Cæsars*; in which a narrative of this kind is by no means to be expected. And, were all the historians of that age remaining, *Judea* lay at the extremity of the *Roman* empire, nor was, in *Herod's*

Vol. II.

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* Joseph. Ant. l. xvii. c. 6. §. 5. Bell. Jud. l. i. c. 32. §. 6.

† *Jeseph Scaliger* is said to have denied the genuineness of this part of *St. Matthew*. *Anfaldi* hath defended it, in a book, intitled, *Herodiani Infanticidii vindicie*, 4o. Brixæ, 1747.

reign, a province of it, properly speaking: the smaller internal affairs therefore of such a petty district, would be little regarded, amidst so many of greater importance. And, though the murder of a number of innocent babes excites in us, with the utmost reason, the strongest pity and horror; yet, alas, the case was far otherwise during the days of pagan darkness; when, in the most civilized nations, parents destroyed, or exposed to destruction, their own children, at pleasure, how strange soever it may seem, without scruple and without punishment.

But further, it doth not appear, that any other old authors ever did write the life of *Herod*, or the history of his reign, than *Nicolas of Damascus*, and *Josephus*. Now the work of the former is lost. And he was not only a courtier and domestic friend of *Herod*, but was employed as ambassador to *Augustus*, to defend him in his life-time, and his character after his death, from imputations of tyranny and cruelty, brought before that emperor by the Jewish nation*. This man therefore neither would be inclined to relate such things of him in his book; nor could do it indeed, without condemning himself for having been his apologist. Besides, he was so shamefully partial to him, as to deduce his genealogy from a noble Hebrew family; though it was notorious, that his father was an *Edomite*†.

As for *Josephus*: he wrote at the distance of above 90 years after the fact: which we are apt to consider, as taking away many more lives, than probably it did. *Bethlehem* was not a large place: whether its territory was, we know not. The order given could be only against the male children. *Herod*, we are told, slew all these, under a certain age: that is, all whom the messengers of his bloody purpose found. But possibly, going on so shocking an errand, they might not be desirous of executing their orders with the utmost secrecy and strictness. Or, if they were; the alarm, once taken, would quickly spread; and a considerable proportion undoubtedly be carried away, or concealed. The fabulous legends tell us indeed of vast multitudes killed: but alledge no sufficient proof of

* Joseph. Ant. l. xvi. c. 9. §. 4. & c. 10. §. 8. & l. xvii. c. 5. §. 4. & c. 11. §. 3. & Bell. l. Jud. l. ii. c. 6. §. 2. † Joseph. Ant. l. xiv. c. 1. 3.

of their assertions*. And the wiser authors, even of the popish communion, disregard and ridicule them. Now, supposing the number of the slaughtered infants to be small; the memory of what a few villagers had suffered, might easily, when printing was unknown, and writing not near so common as now, be, in much less time than 90 years, quite buried under the stories of the many large executions, which the tyrant had made, of persons more noted. Or it might be industriously stifled by the unbelieving Jews, to prevent it from being of service to the cause of christianity. Or indeed it might be utterly overwhelmed by the destruction of their country, with the slaughter of millions, which had happened before *Josephus* began to compile materials for his book. It is therefore extremely possible, that this massacre, though perfectly true, might never come to his ears: or, if it did, yet not with any certainty. And, if his information about it seemed to him rather doubtful, he did wisely in passing it over.

But supposing him ever so sure of it; he might think proper only to involve it covertly in a general account of the butcheries of *Herod* about this time; occasioned, as he saith, which is exceedingly remarkable, by the expectation of a new king†. For he might be unwilling, or even afraid, to offend the posterity of that monarch, with one of whom, *Agrippa*, he was intimate, by the express relation of a barbarity so unmanly: and might think, that he had sufficiently given his readers to understand *Herod's* character, without saying more‡. If the testimony concerning our Saviour ascribed to him, be genuine; his omitting to name these children will be an objection of small

* *Jerom* saith, *Herodes, Scriba & Pharisei, pro uno infante multa parvulorum millia trucidarunt.* Com. in Is. l. 3. c. 7. vol. 4. p. 112, Ed. *Veron.* But he lived about 400 years after the time. And as he asserts what the least reflection would have shewn him was false, that the Scribes and Pharisees were guilty of this fact, he deserves no credit in what lay more out of his knowledge.

† Ant. l. xvii. c. 2. §. 4

‡ *Josephus*, in his own life, § 65. saith, "It is necessary, that a historian should write truth: but he may allowably avoid charging on some persons their ill actions with bitterness; not for their sakes, but for that of his own moderation." But he saith this, not in relation to *Herod*, but to excuse himself for not having expostulated till then with *Justus*, on the falsehoods contained in his history of the Jewish war, published before that of *Josephus*.

small weight against the gospel history. And if that testimony be not genuine; it will be no wonder in the least, that he, who for the sake of paying court to *Vespasian*, as the foretold *Messiah*, could suppress the mention of *Jesus*, and his miracles, should avoid to record a fact, which must have brought the same *Jesus* in view, under that character; and *Bethlehem*, as the place where the Messiah should be born*. He hath been silent, in other parts of his work, for much less reasons, about many considerable things, of which he must have known the truth†. Indeed it is so frequent in all histories for one author to pass over things, even of great consequence, which another relates, that, if this were to be made a ground of suspicion concerning the articles thus omitted; scarce any author could preserve his credit, and certainly not *Josephus*: for in very much of what he delivers, he stands entirely single, and unsupported. Another material consideration is, that as he wrote long after *St. Matthew*, whose gospel must have been well known in *Judea*, he might, and surely would, have contradicted him in this point, if he could: which he hath not.

It may be added further, that *Macrobius* a *Roman* writer, who lived indeed a considerable time after both of them, in the beginning of the fifth century, but saith he compiled his performance out of earlier books; and who, by putting *Syria* instead of *Bethlehem*, shews, he did not borrow this part from the New Testament; and who, being a heathen, was not partial to the gospel history; mentions *Herod's* murder of the children, as a known truth‡. And his joining another fact with it, which possibly happened at a month's distance from it, is by no means enough to discredit his testimony: which will be greatly confirmed, if we believe *Sixtus Senensis*, a learned man, who lived two centuries ago, and saith he read the same account with that of *Macrobius*, in a part, now lost, of *Dion Cassius*, a Pagan historian, 100 years older than *Macrobius*§.

A book

* Perhaps for a like reason *Jesus* never mentioned the christians, though they made no contemptible figure than in *Palestine*.

† See *Ottii Spicileg.* in *Joseph.*

‡ See, concerning these particulars, *Maffion's* appendix to *Bishop Chandler's* vindication.

§ See *Dr. Gregory Sharp's* argument in defence of christianity, p. 41.

A book also, of uncertain date, written in *Hebrew* by a most virulent Jew, admits *Herod* to have done this deed*.

But whatever may be said concerning the omission of it by others, you may wonder, that all the Evangelists, excepting *St. Matthew*, should omit it. For they all relate the same matters, in several instances of less moment: but then these were chiefly, if not solely, matters which came to pass after our Saviour's public teaching began, and at which they were present. *St. Luke* and *St. John* have each of them many particulars, and even *St. Mark* hath some, which none of the rest have. And plainly no one of them undertook to publish a complete history of our Saviour's life: but each wrote those occurrences, which he knew or remembered best, or judged the most needful to be inserted in his narrative. What the beloved disciple's faith of his own gospel, may be extended to each of the former. *Many other things Jesus did*, (and doubtless other persons did in relation to him) *which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe†*. The fact now before us was not the most necessary to be known. Had *St. Matthew* likewise been silent about it, our faith would still have had abundantly sufficient evidence. But when he had related it, there was less need, that the gospels, which came after, should. And perhaps the greater wonder is, that so many such things are repeated in them, than that so few are.

But hence arises one very natural and important observation more: that *St. Matthew* could have no temptation to forge a story, which was no way essential to his design, and might have been so easily disproved when he wrote, if it was not true: especially, as he is understood to have written in *Judea*. Or, if he had been so rash, the early writers against christianity would have charged him with it, and the early writers for it endeavoured to defend him: and there is not the least appearance of either.

Still one circumstance may seem attended with a difficulty. Why should *Herod* carry his cruelty so far, as to slay all the children from two years old and under, when one year, or half

* *Tolloth Jeschu*, published by Huldreich at Leyden, 1705, 8vo. p. 11, 12. But perhaps he might take the fact from *St. Matthew*, only perverting it, as he doth absurdly, to his own purpose.

† *John* xx. 30, 31. *xxi.* 25.

a year, if not less, would have answered his end as well? Now here perhaps we commonly mistake the Evangelist. For learned men have held, that the original word, translated, *from two years*, may mean, not, from two years completed, but from two years begun; from the entrance into the second year. But if that be doubtful: yet *Herod*, notwithstanding that he inquired exactly, when the star appeared to the wise men, could not be sure, nor they tell him, whether it appeared to them exactly at the birth of the child, or some time after it. Nor do we know, how long it might be after that appearance, that they were able to settle their affairs and begin their journey; nor from what distance they came, nor what hindrances might happen in their way; nor what stay they might make at *Jerusalem* before *Herod* sent for them; and then, before he dismissed them: nor consequently, how old the child was when they saw him. The slaughter of the innocents is appointed in our calendar to be commemorated three days after the nativity. If that was supposed to be the real time, the meaning must have been, not to place it, or the coming of the wise men, preposterously, before the appearance of the star, which is fixed in our calendar to the twelfth day, but to place it almost a year after. And if the child could either in reality, or in *Herod's* imagination, be almost a year old; a wretch of such unspeakable jealousy as he was, and whose express character it is, in the Jewish historian, rather to go too far in his fears and suspicions, than fall short*, would by no means think it safe, especially in his passion, to give an order extending to much less than two years.

These, I think, are all the objections and doubts, that can well be raised in relation to this part of the gospel narrative. And if any of them hath received a more satisfactory answer, than it was beforehand imagined could be given; a modest and equitable mind will be ready to conclude, that other scripture difficulties also may in all likelihood be fairly solved, whether the particular manner of doing it appear at present, or not.

It will now be asked, what use we are to make of this piece of history? And here perhaps it may be worth while just to observe, that in the first place we should be careful not to make
a bad

* Ant. l. xvi. c. 8. §. 2.

a bad one. For a very bad and absurd one hath been derived down, though I hope not to many of the present generation from the times of popish ignorance: in which persons imagined, that the day of the week, on which mass was annually performed in honour of these children, thence called *Gbiltermass* day, was an unlucky one throughout the year, and unfit for the beginning of any business. But what shadow of pretence is there, that because we commemorate then *Herod's* doing a very wicked thing, we should abstain from doing such right and proper things, as fall in our way? Not only this fancy, but all of this kind, are utterly without foundation in reason, scripture, primitive christianity, or daily experience, if people will but mind what passes, with common care and sense. They serve to no one good purpose whatever: they fetter the hand of persons; and disquiet their minds with superstitions, which, at the same time, are profane and irreligious, fears and observances; as if the providence of God did not always equally watch over us in our lawful undertakings; but he hath given some days out of his own hands into those of the wicked one. Weak minds, it is true, may fall into such errors inconsiderately without much blame. But to cast them off, when you are warned of the nature of them, is an evident duty. I proceed to the proper uses.

And surely one of them is, to observe, how pitiable they are, who live under the arbitrary government of despotic princes, that may do, as often as their passions prompt them, the cruellest actions without controul; and to thank God from the bottom of our hearts, that we live in a land of law and liberty, where no such bloody commands, as those of *Herod*, can be issued forth: but we enjoy securely whatever is dear to us; and the meanest, while innocent, hath nothing to fear from the greatest.

Another point is, to take notice, for a caution to us, what amazing lengths of sin human creatures are capable of going, unless they stop themselves at first; especially when love of power and dominion hurries them on: and how possible it is, for the vilest of designs to be covered, as *Herod* did his, with pretences of the utmost zeal for religion. Nor should we omit to remark at the same time, how painful the agitations of an evil heart must surely be, while it is working itself up to resolutions and deeds of such horror, and how terrifying its re-
flections

flections afterwards. But especially we should dwell on this meditation, which arises most naturally from the subject before us, that opposing our own wisdom to that of heaven is the grossest of all follies. Doubtless the crafty monarch, when he gave out his orders, applauded within himself more than a little the prudence of this master-stroke: and despised the cowardly politicians that have scruples, and stop at half way. *But why boastest thou thyself, thou tyrant, that thou canst do mischief, whereas the goodness of God endureth yet daily*?* Through that wicked men will always fail, either of the point, at which they are aiming, or of the happiness, which they expected from it. *Herod* failed even of the first. The infants, whom he would have wished to spare, he destroyed: the infant, whom alone he wished to destroy, escaped him. So he plunged himself into the deepest guilt, and gave up his memory to endless infamy; and got nothing by it of what he hoped. Thus was he *mocked*, not so properly *of the wise men*, though by means of them, as of God himself; according to the prediction, many ages before, concerning him, and all resembling him. *Why do the heathen so furiously rage together, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against his anointed. He, that dwelleth in heaven, shall laugh them to scorn: the Lord shall have them in derision†.* Nor was he disappointed only, which he might know in this life, though we are not sure he did, but called soon after, in a dreadful and exemplary manner, to his final account: dying in all the agonies of a body tortured with a complication of noisome diseases, and a soul driven to the extremity of fury and despair.

From such dispensations of providence as this, and from the gracious promises of God's holy word, his church, though tenderly affected by the wickedness of its persecutors, as well as the frequent sufferings of its members, may yet learn to look beyond both, and contemplate with triumph its own security; the shameful defeats of the former, and, even if they appear to succeed, the glorious rewards of the latter. *The virgin, the daughter of Sion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee‡.* Hence the days, on which the apostles and others died martyrs

have

* Ps. lii. 1, 2.

† Ps. ii. 1, 2, 4.

‡ Is. xxxvii. 22.

have been joyfully observed as their birth days : and shedding their blood, considered as sowing seed for the future increase of believers. Hence also the memory of these infants hath been celebrated in the assemblies of christians from the primitive times : as we read in a work, that hath been ascribed to *Origen*, who lived 1500 years ago*. For their murder was regarded as a martyrdom undergone by them in deed, though not in will ; since they lost their lives on Christ's account, and, as the collect of our church for this festival expresses it, *glorified God by their deaths* ; were instrumental in making the birth of his Son, and his watchful care of him, remarkable in the highest degree.

Let us therefore likewise pay due regard to their memory : and look on it as their unspeakable happiness, that they were sent, on such an account, by the tyrant's sword, to heaven, in the morning of their days, secure from the danger of living to be wicked here, and miserable hereafter. Let us also apply the same consideration to any familiar affliction of our own : for we cannot undergo a severer, and few, if any, upon earth, have ever undergone so severe a one, as that of the poor parents of these children. Let us recollect from this instructive lesson, that the sharpest sufferings may fall on the most innocent persons ; that the nearest of our relations, and dearest of our blessings, are God's property more than our own ; but that if he takes them from us, he not only can, but unless it be our fault will, make us ample amends in a better world : and that therefore, though we may lawfully mourn the loss of them ; yet we ought meekly to submit to it : supported by the hope of a blessed resurrection for them and ourselves ; and applying to our own case, in a higher sense, what was originally said, perhaps in a lower, to *Rachel*, weeping for her children : *thus saith the Lord, restrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears : for thy work shall be rewarded, and they shall come again from the land of the enemy†.*

* Hom. 3. in diversos.

† Jer xxxi. 15, 16.

S E R M O N LXXXVI.

THE HAPPINESS OF A GODLY LIFE.

P S A L M CXXVIII. 5, 6.

The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion, and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life.

Yea, thou shalt see thy childrens children, and peace upon Israel.

THE subject of this psalm is declared in the first verse. *Blessed is every one, that feareth the Lord, that walketh in his ways.* For godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come*. The present happiness attending it was indeed somewhat more visible, while there was more need it should, in those earlier times, when the future rewards of it were less clearly discovered. But in every succeeding age also, the practice of religion and virtue hath appeared to all prudent inquirers, the likeliest and surest way to avoid the miseries of life, and secure the enjoyments of it. The first advantage, which the psalmist promises to the pious, comprehends in general health and success in their affairs. *For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.* The next is a particular blessing of the nearest concern; the possession of domestic and conjugal felicity, in the midst of a large and well ordered family. *Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table.* For such plants would soon afford both an agreeable shelter to those who feast under them in the open air, as the eastern manner was, and a considerable profit to the owners of them. Delight, security, and plenty at home, being usually the

* 1 Tim. iv. 8.

the principal objects of desire, the psalmist lays an emphatical stress on them, by adding, *Behold, thus shall the man be blessed, that feareth the Lord.* But still, as good persons can never thoroughly relish their own private welfare, if the community suffers at the same time, or calamities are likely to befall it soon, an assurance is given them in the last place, that their exemplary obedience to the laws of God will, through his mercy, contribute to their being witnesses of the prosperity, both of their country and their descendants during a long course of years: *The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion, and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy childrens children, and peace upon Israel:* in which concluding part of this most pleasing view even of the present condition of religious and virtuous persons, we have it signified to us,

I. That a large portion of their happiness consists in the flourishing state of their country.

II. That his happiness is greatly increased by a prospect, that their own posterity will continue to flourish with it.

III. That both these things depend on, and are to be expected from, the divine benediction.

I. That a large portion of their happiness consists in the flourishing state of their country.

Every thing hath an influence on our enjoyments, in proportion to the share which it hath in our affections. And affection to the public never fails to be remarkably strong in worthy breasts. The complete character indeed of social virtue, if considered in theory, is good will towards all men. And no concern for a part deserves praise, if it be inconsistent with benevolence to the whole. But the whole, even of this earth, is an object so vast, that few, if any, can preserve in their minds a fixed regard to it, or entertain the smallest hope of doing it service. Therefore mankind is advantageously divided into many particular societies. And a zeal in the members of each for the benefit of their own deserves, not only to be encouraged as a most useful quality, but honoured, as a most laudable one. It shews a rightness and greatness of mind, capable of being affected by a common interest: it shews the most amiable of virtues, love, towards a large part of our fellow-creatures, and implies nothing contrary towards the rest. For the real good of every people in the world is compatible with the real

good of every other. To rule and to oppress is no good to any: and peace and liberty and friendly intercourse for mutual convenience all the nations of the earth may enjoy at once.

This virtue indeed, as well as others, hath been frequently misunderstood: and false appearances of it unhappily pursued. Yet even then so much rightness of intention towards their own community was mixed in the minds of men with wrong behaviour towards the nations round them, that their injustice, though monstrous, hath been always considered with indulgence, nay often admired as heroism. And the only people, too severely censured on this head, hath been the Jewish; whose very law some have charged with teaching ill will to the rest of the world, though it hath more precepts of compassion and tenderness towards them, than perhaps any other. They were indeed commanded to set out with extirpating the *Canaanites*, and planting themselves in their land. But well might heaven decree, after a forbearance of several ages, the destruction of these wretches, abandoned at once to the most unnatural lusts, and the most shocking barbarities: and (which made their recovery hopeless) both of them practised, as acts of their religion. Nor could the Jews be more strongly warned against committing such enormities, than by being appointed to punish them; as God may certainly punish, either by his own hand, or by whom he will. But with all mankind ever after, they were to live in peace: only avoiding intimacies likely to corrupt them, and extinguish that profession of faith in the one true God, which they were designed to preserve for the general benefit. Accordingly they were, when free, as good neighbours, and when conquered, as good subjects, as other men; till heathen persecution provoked them to hate even those heathens, who were no persecutors: and then it was time for our Saviour to teach them, not the love of their country (for of that, such as it was, they had too much) but the universal love of all men: a doctrine equally needful, though on different accounts, for the *Romans* also. Yet he, and his great apostle *St. Paul*, were shining examples of most affectionate concern for their brethren of the house of *Israel*, even while they received the cruelest treatment from them. And, though the first disciples were chiefly private persons, under one absolute dominion, and that, of unbelieving magistrates, and consequent-

ly

ly no other political injunctions, than those of dutiful obedience and uniformly moral behaviour, could with propriety be laid upon them; yet these are inculcated with such diligence, and grounded on such principles in the New Testament, that as ample a provision is made by them for the public welfare as then was feasible: and whoever will seriously consider the gospel rules, will be far from asserting, with a late author *, that the love of his country is a virtue purely voluntary in a christian.

But, though every pious person will always consider the happiness of his country, as a very interesting part of his own, yet the degree in which he will consider it so, must greatly depend on the relation to it, in which he stands. And therefore they who are distinguished by the more important relations, whose office and business consists in being *the ministers of God for good* †, to numbers, to nations of their fellow-creatures at once, they must have exalted satisfaction in seeing *the pleasure of the Lord prosper in their hands* ‡. Every instance of national felicity must warm their breasts with singular consolation: above all, when they are conscious of its arising from their own rightness of mind, and vigilance of conduct: when they know they have deserved from the people under them that excellent character of *David: he fed them with a faithful and true heart, and ruled them prudently with all his power* §.

II. The next thing to be learnt from the text is, that the happiness, accruing to good men from the flourishing state of their country, is greatly encreased by the prospect, that their own posterity will continue to flourish with it.

The desire of exerting our tenderest affections, which are the conjugal and parental, and leaving representatives of ourselves behind us, to preserve our name, inherit our substance, and carry on the designs of providence on earth, is deeply rooted in our frame: it hath always influenced the conduct of men, in proportion as they have lived agreeably to the simplicity of nature: and they who have thought the absolute restraint of this inclination the way to higher degrees of purity and spiritual perfection, have entertained a notion as evidently wrong, as the divine constitution of things is right. But though such
imagi-

* Lord Shaftesbury.

† Rom. xiii. 4.

‡ 1c. iii. 20.

§ Pl. lxxviii. 73.

imaginations are groundless, preclude the exercise of many virtues, and weaken human society: yet the indulgence of irregular liberties, however favourably their own or common practice may induce persons to think of them, produces effects far more hurtful: overturns all good order, destroys the peace of families, introduces endless confusions and distresses, causes most afflicting breaches of faith, tempts to most execrable barbarities, effaces gradually all moral principles, and begets more crimes and sorrows, than almost any one sin besides. The sacred institution of marriage therefore is of the utmost importance to the innocence and the happiness of mankind. They who avoid it, as engaging them in cares and troubles, distrust the goodness of God, who hath made every article of proper behaviour, on the whole, our present interest; and they who discourage it, as many do grievously, though not professedly, by running into needless expences and refinements, pervert, for the sake of vanities and follies, the plain way, which heaven hath marked out for public strength and private comfort.

Now if a likelihood, merely that their offspring shall partake in the general felicity, is able to fill the minds of men with great emotions; what transporting reflections must they have, whose descendants appear destined by the stations of their parents to be authors of that felicity in their turn and degree! How strongly must such a hope induce them to secure by good example and instruction this highest honour and blessedness to such as are to inherit their dignities! And how warm a return of most affectionate gratitude will they merit and receive from mankind, if virtue and liberty shall not only be supported by them in the present age, but transmitted to succeeding ones, by their pious care of forming their progeny to the knowledge and the love of public good! The prospect only of *childrens children* would have little joy in it, without that of *peace upon Israel*: without a reasonable expectation of their contributing to the true glory of the family, from which they spring, and the true happiness of the nation, over which they are to preside. But when due provision is made for this, both sovereign and people may take up the words of the Psalmist: *Like as the arrows in the hand of the giant, even so are the young children. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full*

full of them: they shall not be ashamed, when they speak with their enemies in the gate.*

But then, as ever we hope to see either our public or our private happiness continue, we must be careful to remember,

III. That both depend on the divine benediction.

Except the Lord build the house, their labour is but lost that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.—Children, and the fruit of the womb, are an heritage and gift that cometh of the Lord†. These are the express declarations of holy writ: and both reason and experience humbly subscribe to them. It is not indeed possible for us in many cases to discern particularly in what manner the providence of God conducts things: but we may plainly discern in general, that as the whole course of nature is nothing else than the free appointment, which he hath been pleased to make; as the motions of the inanimate world proceed from those which he originally impressed upon it; and all the thoughts and actions of intelligent beings are doubtless absolutely subject to the influence of their Maker; since we see they are greatly subject, and often when they perceive it not, to that of their fellow-creatures;) it must be in his power by various ways, perhaps the more effectual for being unknown, to dispose of every thing so, as may best answer his wise purposes of mercy or correction. And as he evidently can do this, it is likewise evidently worthy of him to do it; for the highest of his titles is that of the moral governor of the universe; and therefore, we may firmly believe the scripture assuring us, that he doth it in fact; that he makes *all things work together for good to them that love him‡* and *curses the very blessings§* of those who love him not.

Whenever then we find our affairs going on to our content, our families flourishing, our healths constant, our hearts full of exultation, and dictating language to us like that of *David, in my prosperity I said, I shall never be removed*; let us be sure also like him to add, *thou, Lord, of thy goodness hast made my bill so strong||*. In the hand of God it is, whether we shall have the things that we wish for; whether, when we have them, they shall prove comforts or afflictions, the joy or the grief of our souls; whether lastly, if they are ever so dear to us, they shall

* Ps. cxxvii. 5, 6.

† Ps. cxxvii. 1, 2, 4.

‡ Rom. viii. 28.

§ Mal. ii. 2.

|| Ps. xxx. 6.

shall remain with us, or be snatched from us: and therefore, it unspeakably concerns us all to interest providence in our behalf. They whom God favours most, are by no means exempt from sufferings: but he not only will always make religious persons full amends hereafter, but ordinarily grant them deliverance and consolation here. Thus the Psalmist, immediately after his above-mentioned triumph, had cause to subjoin, *thou didst turn thy face from me, and I was troubled**. But it follows, *then cried I unto thee, and gat me to my Lord right humbly†*. *Thou turnest my heaviness into joy: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness‡*.

Persecutions indeed, more or less, the apostle hath told us, *all shall suffer, that will live godly in Christ§*: and partly on that very account. But in these, they shall be enabled to *take pleasure||*, even when they are the heaviest: and usually they are very light, compared with the calamities, which the wicked bring on their own heads. The natural tendency of christian virtues is to happiness; of sin, to misery: God hath appointed this tendency, and he will make it effectual. If nations, in the midst of their wealth and tranquillity, will not shew they are sensible, that he bestows them, he will justly prove it by taking them away. And if those persons, whom he hath raised to superior honours, and favoured with marks of distinguished goodness, will ungratefully forget, by whose power and for whose service they were thus exalted and blessed, he can easily make them know by unexpected judgements, *that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men¶*, and doth according to his will in the armies of heaven, and amongst the inhabitants of the earth. But princes and their people, joining together in thankful obedience to the laws of their great benefactor, will be happy in themselves and each other, will *shine as lights in the world***; and, to speak in the language of the prophet, *upon all their glory there shall be a defence††*. For God will save Sion, and build the cities of Judah.—*The posterity also of his servants shall inherit it; and they, that love his name, shall dwell therein‡‡*. *Their children shall continue, and their seed be established before him§§*.

* Ver. 7.

† Ver. 8.

‡ Ver. 12.

§ 2 Tim. iii. 12.

|| 2 Cor. xii. 10

¶ Dan. iv. 25.

Phil. ii. 15.

†† Is. iv. 5.

‡‡ Ps. lxxix. 36, 37.

§§ Ps. cii. 28.

SERMON LXXXVII.

THE RATIONAL IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN FAST.

MATTH. vi. 16.

Moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites.

THE practice of fasting from a principle of religion has been thought of by different persons in so very different a manner; some placing it amongst the highest duties, whilst others account it mere superstition: and a great part of those, who observe it the most rigidly, are so little improved by it in true goodness: that, I hope, discoursing on this subject may be useful in general, as well as particularly seasonable at present, to direct your judgement and behaviour in relation to it. And therefore, I have chosen to treat of it from words of the greatest authority; those of our blessed Saviour: which contain,

I. A supposition, that religious fasting would be used amongst his followers: *When ye fast.*

II. A caution against using it amiss: *Be not as the hypocrites.*

I. A supposition, that religious fasting would be used amongst his followers: which indeed he must suppose of course, unless he forbid it; because the custom had very long been, and was then, universal in the world. Not only the people of the great city and empire of *Nineveh*, as we read in scripture, but the *Egyptians*, *Greeks*, *Romans*, almost all nations, of whose religion we have any particular accounts, appear to have been led, either by nature or ancient tradition, to abstain from their food, on certain occasions, as an exercise of piety. The Jewish law could not be the original of an observance,

that had spread so wide: especially, as that law appoints but one single day in the whole year to be kept as a public fast, and gives no orders for private fasting at all. Yet we find, from the early times of their common-wealth downwards, many other public fasts observed by them, as exigencies required: we find the prophets approving and enjoining them, and directing how they are to be solemnized: we find the most exemplary in goodness amongst them, taking this way of humbling themselves before God in secret, not only on personal and domestic, but national accounts, and graciously accepted in so doing.

The same usage continued to our Saviour's days. For we read in *St. Luke**, of *Anna* the prophetess, that *she served God with fastings and prayers night and day*. Indeed by this time, over and above several yearly fasts appointed by authority†, the stricter sort observed two every week voluntarily‡. And not only the Pharisees, but *John's* disciples also, fasted often§. Nor doth our blessed Lord condemn any part of these things: but, leaving the frequency of fasting to public and private prudence, regulates only the manner of it; and by so doing, plainly treats it as a practice, intended for perpetual use. It is true, he doth not, in so many words, *command* his disciples to fast: he only saith, *when ye fast*. But so he had said just before, *when thou doest thine alms*||, *when thou prayest*¶. And had he not designed, that fasting should be considered in some degree as a duty also; he would never have promised a reward to the right performance of it, as he doth in the next verse but one, after the text. And besides, he not only fasted himself, in a manner quite beyond our imitation, but declared, that though then his disciples did not fast, yet after *he was taken from them, they should*** : which they verified accordingly. *Cornelius* indeed was not yet a christian, when he fasted to the ninth hour††: but that was amongst the means of his becoming one. We read in the following chapters of the *Acts*, that congregations, under the guidance of prophets and apostles, fasted on more occasions than one‡‡. *St. Paul* enjoins private persons

* *Luke* ii. 37. † *Zach* viii. 19. ‡ *Luke* xviii. 12. § *Matth*. ix. 14.

|| Verse 2. ¶ Verse 6. ** *Matth*. ix. 15. †† *Acts* x. 30.

‡‡ *Acts* xiii. 2, 3, xiv. 23.

persons to give themselves at times to *fasting and prayer**. The whole christian church, from the beginning, hath both esteemed and practised it not a little: and to this day both the ecclesiastical and civil powers continue to prescribe it. But for yet fuller satisfaction, and indeed for our direction also, let us inquire more particularly, what its meaning and uses are.

One very useful meaning is, to express our sorrow for having offended God, and our sense of not deserving the least of his favours. By some it hath been thought, that our first parents introduced it, as a penitential memorial of their eating the forbidden fruit: which indeed it might very properly express. But without insisting on this, for which we have no warrant, abstaining for some time from our daily food signifies, most naturally, that we are unworthy of it; and can take no comfort in it, whilst we are under the divine displeasure. And as anciently, every thing of importance was denoted, especially in the eastern countries, by actions as well as words; this was probably the original purpose, for which men used fasting. And it was then sometimes extended to children and cattle; in token, that the parents and owners of them had forfeited the dearest blessings, and most valuable conveniences of life. It is true, a proper confession in words would have expressed the same thing, that this ceremony doth, and somewhat more clearly, unless it were explained in words. But in all likelihood it usually was: or if not, the difficulty of understanding it cannot be accounted great. And where it is appointed by authority, or prevails by custom, as the established method of signifying humiliation, we are as much bound to comply with it, as with any other appointment or custom; and should be as justly thought disobedient or unsociable, if we refused: even though it had no peculiar advantages to compensate for its being of less obvious meaning: whereas indeed it hath considerable ones. For words alone are far from carrying with them that energy and influence upon the mind, which the superadded solemnity of such an abstinence must, even in private cases; and much more, when whole assemblies, and cities, and countries, join in it. But above all, when either persons or nations have been remarkably wicked, such moving and afflicting

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acknowledgements

* 1 Cor. vii. 6. † Joel ii. 16. Jonah iii. 7, 8. Judith iv. 10.

acknowledgements of it are singularly adapted to produce more powerful and lasting impressions on those, who make use of them; and by that means to render them fitter objects of divine mercy.

And, besides the good effects it may have, as a strong outward mark of repentance, it may be a cause, by its physical effects, of our feeling greater degrees of inward conviction. The faculties of many persons are overloaded by continual excess, and *the corruptible body presseth down the soul**: nor can it exert itself, till the burthen upon it is lightened. And without what is commonly called excess, a constant course of high or full living hath so powerful a tendency to immerse our thoughts in worldly objects, and make us, both indolent as to our eternal interests, and fearless of the consequences of such indolence: that all, who pass their days in the free enjoyment of plenty, have need frequently to interrupt their indulgences, however lawful in their nature: to admonish themselves, by so doing, that they have much more important concerns, than the gratification of sense and ease: and to view the state of their souls with attentive thoughtfulness; which abstinence, and its proper companion retirement, would beget. Assuredly numbers of them would then see their condition in respect of God, and a future life, in a very different light, from that, which warm blood, gay spirits, and presumptuous imaginations place it in. And for want of such views it is, that so many are grossly wicked, and so many more very imperfectly and insufficiently good; whom a habit of considerate self-restraint would render by degrees indifferent to earthly enjoyments, and solicitous for those of a better world. Nay, even single acts of such restraint will usually, for the time, lower our passions into some good measure of composedness, and make our sorrow for sin humbler and deeper: on both which accounts fasting is called in scripture, *afflicting the soul*†. For it mortifies the desires of the sensitive part, and enlivens the remorse of the rational. By these means, it may contribute much to render our faith of invisible things more lively, and our devotions more fervent: for which reason fasting is always understood in scripture, and always ought in practice, to be accompanied by prayer. And in proportion as it qualifies us to pray as we ought, it assures

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* Wisd. ix. 15.

† Is. lviii. 3, 5.

us of obtaining our requests; whether they be for averting God's judgements, or deriving his mercies upon us, in our public capacity or private.

These are some of the spiritual benefits, for I omit to mention the corporeal ones, though very considerable, which recommend fasting. And surely they are at least sufficient to keep every pretender to seriousness from deriding it, or thinking meanly of such as practise it. Though any one may judge, or find, it ever so useless to himself; yet he cannot well know what it may be to others. And therefore, the rule of scripture is in this sense perfectly just: *let not him, that eateth, despise him, that eateth not**. If he doth, his contempt may light on characters of the highest eminence in wisdom and goodness; as it happened in the case of the royal psalmist: *the reproaches of them, that reproached thee, are fallen upon me. I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting; and that was turned to my reprooft*.

But as we ought, by all the prudence we can, to spare others the guilt, and ourselves the uneasiness and provocation, of such unkind treatment: so we should be yet more careful not to deserve it in any degree: and should therefore take diligent notice, that the text contains,

II. A caution against using this practice amiss. Our Saviour indeed prohibits expressly no other abuses, than such as hypocrites committed: and mentions, of those, only one in particular. But as he certainly meant that, merely for a specimen of many; and designed, that all should be avoided; it will be useful to set before you others also, most of which are condemned expressly somewhere in the word of God; and all implicitly here.

Fasting is a duty, not for its own sake: for neither *meat*, nor abstaining from meat, *commendeth us to God†*: but for the sake of its good effects. Proportionably therefore, as in any person's case it is found, on impartial and full trial, to fail of those effects, or to produce bad ones, which outweigh or equal them, it ceases to be a duty; any farther than the obligation of setting no hurtful example, and giving no offence, may justly demand regard. And as the cases of different persons differ extremely, it is either wicked tyranny, or pitiable unskillfulness,

* Rom. xiv. 3.

† Ps. lxi. 9, 10.

‡ 1 Cor. viii. 8.

nels, to enjoin, as the church of *Rome* doth, all persons to abstain, so often, and for so long together, from eating flesh; and all persons of such an age, and such a state of life and health, to eat only once in a day, or little more, of what they are suffered to eat. Prescribing such rules, as these, to the whole world, must bring hardships and distresses on millions of persons, especially the poor, from which they can receive no good, but may suffer much harm. It will give them wrong notions of religion, as consisting principally in outward observances; and multiply grievously the temptations of sin, by adding imaginary duties, that will often be more difficult than the real ones. They allow indeed some occasional exceptions from these general rules: and yet, even did they also allow persons to judge for themselves, when their circumstances came within those exceptions, it would still be a source of endless doubts and scruples to timorous minds. But besides the uncertainty, whether they may in conscience desire to be excepted, they are subjected to the will and pleasure of others, whether that desire shall be granted; and to a large expence for it, if it be: And these and other dispensations are one fund of wealth to the clergy and court of *Rome*, which they have used to the vilest purposes. But in order to our judging rightly, in what degree this will be expedient for us, divers things ought to be considered. Not many indeed of our church, in the present age, run at all into excessive austerities: very far from it, God knows. But if any do, they ought to be warned: and though none did here, the christian doctrine ought to be vindicated from the imputation of leading to such extremes any where.

Fasting consists in abstaining, wholly or in part, from our ordinary food. Abstaining wholly the former part of the day is undoubtedly the natural, and should be the general method of doing this. But they, in whose case good reasons forbid it, may, by properly restraining themselves in the latter part, keep their fast to all good purposes, after they have, in common speech, broken it. Continuing a total abstinence longer than a day can hardly ever be, and so long seldom is, either useful or safe. And though a considerable approach towards abstinence for the whole day, if conducted prudently, may be allowed at proper intervals for some small time, when designed for self-punishment in great faults; as indeed lessening our fast into a trifle, on any occasion, public or private, would be mocking
God,

God, cheating ourselves, and giving scandal or bad example to others: yet when subduing irregular appetites and passions is the end in view, moderate severity, and barely, if at all, exceeding the strictness of an exact and rigorous temperance, but long continued, will be most effectual.

Abstaining from particular sorts of food, from flesh-meat for instance, as the strongest and most pleasing sort, if it be not hurtful, is very proper; and on public fasts especially, as being the common and most visible mark of compliance with what public authority enjoins. But still this abstinence, besides that laying a great stress upon it leads to superstition, or at least affords it countenance, may, to some persons, be no self-denial at all, but consistent with most luxurious indulgence. There are many, to whom several sorts of fish are more delicious, than land-animals; and perhaps full as nutritive. Nay, methods have been invented, by which the palate is hardly ever so much pleased, as when it is pretended to be mortified. The true direction then concerning the fare of our fasting seasons, is that, which the example of the prophet *Daniel* furnishes: *In those days I ate no pleasant bread*: that is, nothing contrived to gratify or provoke the appetite, but the plainest of wholesome diet. That we ought to be full as abstemious in what we drink, as what we eat, is very clear; and both are put on a level in the same passage of *Daniel*: *Neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth*. The scripture also condemns every other needless indulgence at such times. *Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Behold, in the day of your fast, ye find pleasure*. Nor can there be a doubt, but intemperance, or even excess of gaiety, either designedly preceding a fast, as is common in the *Romish* carnival, or following one, as I fear may sometimes be the case in other churches, intirely destroys the religious use of it.

Deluding ourselves by such contrivances, and attempting to impose upon God the performance of some small part of what he requires, instead of the whole, is as real, and more absurd and fatal hypocrisy, than endeavouring to deceive our fellow-creatures. It therefore comes directly under the prohibition of the text: and we have peculiar need to be on our guard against it at present. Of late years we have observed public fasts with more strictness and devotion, than had been seen amongst us in the memory of man. And so far all was well.

But

But have we been afterwards uniformly pious and virtuous, watchful against all sin, and occasions of sin, attentive to our spiritual state and the great concerns of eternity? Or have we thought, that crowding the churches for a day, and abstaining from a folly or two for a winter, perhaps with an ill will, was religion enough to save the nation and our souls? If any thing like such imaginations have taken hold of us, we have adulterated and debased a powerful remedy into an useless and mischievous palliative, and while we trust to it, are farther from the hope of a radical cure than ever. And were we to amend more thoroughly but for a short time only, our case will be very little better. *O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away* *. Let us therefore, now and at all times, conscientiously beware of this, and every error, in respect of religious mortifications. Let us neither superstitiously over-value, nor profanely despise, institutions for that purpose: neither treat ourselves with unprofitable harshness, nor with hurtful indulgence: neither be influenced by servile dread, nor by irreverent presumption: neither submit our consciences to the commands of men, as if they were doctrines of God; nor contemptuously reject proper helps for obeying the laws of God, as worthless inventions of men: neither exalt the means into the same rank with the end, nor hope to arrive at the end without the means. Let us, after the example of the holy apostle, *so run, as not uncertainly; so fight, as not beating the air*: but, with strict and yet prudent discipline, *keep under the body, and bring it into subjection* †. *For every man, that striveth for the mastery, is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible* ‡. Which that we may obtain, &c.

* Hos. vi. 4.

† 1 Cor. ix. 26, 27.

‡ 1 Cor. ix. 25.

S E R M O N LXXXVIII.

ON GOOD CHARACTER, OR GENERAL ESTEEM OF MANKIND.

PROV. xxii. 1.

A good name is rather to be chosen, than great riches.

IT seems very natural to wish, that amidst the great variety of things, which on various accounts appear desirable in this world, we could pass a right judgment concerning the proportionable value of each: that so we might determine, what share of our attention they severally merit; and, when they interfere, which ought to have the preference. Yet this we find to be, in most cases, far beyond our skill. Whether power, or wealth, or ease, an active or a contemplative life, a private station or a public, this profession and employment or that, be more eligible; always hath been disputed, and always will. For the decision will depend on circumstances too numerous and too uncertain to be considered with exactness. And indeed it is for the interest of mankind, that the answers to questions of this sort should be involved in obscurity. For, suppose we all knew how to chuse, yet we could not all have our choice. And, as the whole must consist of very different parts; it is well that our not knowing, which condition would be the best for us, contributes to our receiving, as we are bound, whatever falls to our lot, with a chearful acquiescence in the appointment of Providence.

But though our Maker's wisdom hath left us greatly in the dark about such matters, in which, taking one course or another is but seldom of considerable, if any, importance to the most important of all things, the performance of our duty:

VOL. II.

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yet, in whatever hath a stated connection with that, he hath given us plain directions, both by reason and scripture, how we are to judge and behave. Now there is nothing more closely connected with virtue, than reputation: and therefore he hath connected it as closely with our happiness: not only teaching us, by nature, to esteem it as the chief of outward blessings; but by revelation, to preserve and cherish it with assiduous care. The text, which I have read to you, prefers *a good name to great riches*. Another saith, *it is better than precious ointment**: that is, than the costliest perfumes that were anciently used, in the gayest entertainments of the voluptuous, or the funeral honours of the great. And throughout the word of God, we are excited by examples, as well as precepts, to aim diligently at *obtaining a good report*†. Accordingly, mankind in all ages have been strongly influenced by this principle; and, in a great measure, to what they ought.

But still, as the most powerful motives are apt to be slighted by some, and the rightest perverted by others: there are numbers, who profess to have scarce any regard to reputation; and still greater, who pay it a very undue regard. Therefore, it may be useful to shew you the wrongness and the danger,

I. Of having too little concern about it.

II. Of having too much.

I. Of having too little. One meets, not very uncommonly, with those who affect a perfect indifference to what a silly or malicious world, that hath nothing to do with them or their affairs, may please to think or talk about them. I say, they affect this; because, for the most part, it is mere affectation: and while they pretend not to be moved at all by what is reported of them, they plainly are moved by it greatly: not enough perhaps to conduct themselves with more discretion upon it, (and so much the worse for them;) but enough to be very uneasy and angry about it. Now what really disturbs them, it is a folly to put on the air of despising: and the only sensible method is, to take care and avoid it.

But they plead, that avoiding censure is impossible: people will

* Eccl. vii. 1. † 1 Sam. ii. 24. Prov. xv. 30. Acts vi. 3. x. 22. xxii. 12. Phil. iv. 8. 1 Tim. iii. 7. Heb. xi. 2. 3 John 12.

will say ill-natured things, and make spiteful constructions: some will always be raising stories, and others believing them: and why should one give one's self trouble to prevent what after all cannot be prevented? Nor can it be denied, that the world is very censorious: but it is by no means true, that they who keep on their guard, and they who do not, fare alike in it. Sometimes indeed very innocent and prudent persons may fall under very cruel imputations: but they rarely continue under them. And therefore, if it be not a rule without exception, it is one with but few exceptions, that whoever is much and generally and long evil spoken of, hath been faulty: very probably not in the degree, perhaps not in the manner, that is charged: but there hath been either an approach towards it, or a blameable appearance of it, or something or another that should not have been; else so many would not have judged, or at least have persisted in judging, so unfavourably. Still their judgment may be a sinful one. But why should we tempt them to that sin? It is hurting both them and ourselves. Professing to despise the ill opinion of mankind, creates a shrewd suspicion, that we have deserved it. For if we have not; why do we lie so quiet under it? Why not explain our past conduct, if there be opportunity; or, however, watch so carefully over our future behaviour, as by degrees to silence calumny? It is our duty, not only to be harmless, but useful in the world; and of what use can any person hope to be whom obloquy depreciates, and exposes to dislike? It is our duty, not only to be virtuous, but exemplary in virtue: and, instead of that, we appear examples of wickedness, if we neglect aspersions thrown upon us, when we could wipe them off. And as every new example of it, real or seeming, adds new encouragement to it; the worst of sinners heinously aggravate their sins, by shewing that they are not ashamed of them; besides the imprudence of provoking private and public indignation and contempt.

But, let the guilty manage as they will, surely the innocent must see, that their interest is, not to confound themselves with the former, and share in their reproach by disregarding reputation, but distinguish themselves by a constant, though unaffected, attention to it. Ill people may have their ends in desiring that you should appear like them: but your business is to appear different from them: otherwise you are so far

virtuous to no purpose. And therefore, you forget yourself strangely, if you can give up an advantage, that is peculiar to you. A good name, of all things, is what a bad person cannot secure. And therefore you, that can, should on no account fail of doing it.

The Judgment of others concerning us deserves Respect: and to pay it none, is a shocking want of modesty. Besides, preservation of mutual esteem makes persons amiable to each other: and in that way contributes largely to their common happiness. For it is hateful to think of living in the midst of bad characters only: and that single consideration should excite us powerfully to keep the face of things from having that look. But further, the sense of shame was given us by our Maker for a guard to our sense of duty. And as we want, on many occasions, every guard that we can have; we know not what evils may follow throwing aside this. Persons, who care not what they are thought, are in a very likely way not to care what they do. And therefore, St Paul hath most judiciously intermixed, as being intimately connected, regard to principle, and regard to character. *Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable; whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise; think on these things**.

But were contempt of reputation ever so consistent with our innocence, it would be greatly contrary to our interest notwithstanding. A lost, or even a doubtful fame, in some points, fixes an almost indelible mark upon persons, which deprives them of many advantages in life, and often delivers them over to scorn and wretchedness, for the rest of their days. Nay, even when nothing bad can be said of any one, yet if but little good can, this alone will usually have an unhappy influence on his future situation: whereas an eminently fair character prepossesses every body in the favour of him who bears it: engages friendly treatment, begets trust and confidence, gives credit and weight. Such will always be sought after and employed, respected in their prosperity, assisted under Distresses: in short this distinction is, in effect, beyond all that can be named, honour, and power, and wealth.

But then further, it is pleasure too, which only one other,
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* Phil. iv. 8.

near akin to it, can exceed or equal. For next to the Consciousness of being good and worthy, that of being esteemed so, especially by those who are such themselves, is undoubtedly the joyfullest feeling in the heart of man, and diffuses the highest satisfaction through every intercourse of life. But very afflicting must their inward sensations be, who know they are justly hated, suspected or despised : and in the midst of society must wander about, unesteemed and friendless.

Another very material consideration is, that though offenders often return completely to their duty, it is but seldom and imperfectly that they ever regain their characters, when once forfeited : whereas, by preserving them, they secure not only many and great present benefits, but the pleasing prospect in which our maker hath, with unspeakable goodness, formed us to delight, of leaving an honourable memory behind them for their family to inherit ; and a valuable bequest it frequently proves : while hereditary infamy is the cruel portion, that others leave to their posterity and kindred. *Have regard to thy name, saith the wise son of Sirach, for that shall continue above a thousand great treasures of gold. A happy life hath but a few days : but a good name endureth for ever**. On all accounts then it is our wisdom, as well as our duty, to *provide for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men**.

Still, it must be owned, there are occasions on which neglecting both parts of this rule may appear the shortest way to worldly prosperity. But these appearances are often deceitful. And when they prove such, what hath the wretch, who ventures upon this course, done ? He hath lost his honour, and lost his peace, and got nothing for them. But whatever he gets, he will find his bargain at last a very dear one. He will feel himself inwardly no longer the same man, that he was : he will see himself treated, by the better part of mankind at least, with the coldness, which he knows to come short of his desert ; the respect paid him by the rest will be of very uncertain duration ; and, while it lasts, he will perceive it, by many a token, to be mere outside. He will be afraid perpetually, that some turn of affairs may take away from him the advantages of his baseness, and leave him only the ignominy
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* Ecclus. xli. 12, 13.

† 2 Cor. viii. 21.

of it. Or, how well soever he may escape, or how little soever he may value, the shame of this world; that of the next can neither be avoided nor contemned.

There can be no doubt then, but reputation deserves a very great regard. And therefore I proceed,

II. To warn you against shewing an over-great regard to it.

Many seem to think, that a fair appearance is all they want: and accordingly take little care to support it by reality. But, without the latter, the former will quickly be seen through. And, in the mean time, while few or none else know them, their knowledge of themselves, and perpetual fears that others will find them out, must surely leave them very small pleasure in *having*, as the scripture expresses it, *a name that they live, and being in truth dead**.

Many more, if they are guilty of nothing, which the world thinks enormous, imagine they are quite as good as they need to be: forgetting, that *the Lord seeth not as man seeth*†, but often *that, which is highly esteemed amongst men, is abomination in the sight of God*‡, who knows the secret springs, whence every word and action flow, let us reflect then, that we are to approve our lives and hearts, not merely to our fellow-creatures; but to our Maker, who is perfect in holiness: that we may indeed *have whereof to glory before men; but we can not before God*§; *in whose sight shall no man living be justified*|| by his own works. *Blessed is he, to whom faith in Christ, productive of continual study to amend and improve, is counted for Righteousness: for to him the Lord will not impute sin*¶.

But a still worse degree, if possible, of immoderate regard to our reputation is, when, to raise or preserve it, we transgress our duty. And it is surely a strange perverseness in human nature, that, though fear of disesteem, with every other motive added to it, is frequently insufficient to keep us from acting wrong; yet, on other occasions, that fear alone, in opposition to every other motive, is abundantly sufficient to keep us from acting right. Custom and fashion have brought some parts of morals, and almost the whole of piety,

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* Rev. iii. 1. † 1 Sam. xvi. 7. ‡ Luke xvi. 15. § Rom. iv. 2.

|| Psa. cxliii. 2. Rom. iii. 21. Gal. ii. 16. iii. 10. ¶ Rom. iv. 5—8.

into utter disgrace. At least too many either imprudently chuse, or unhappily fall into such acquaintance, that they must lose their character with them, unless they will throw off their virtue and religion. No wonder if poor thoughtless creatures often sink under this temptation. *But wo to those, by whom the offence cometh* *: who, not content to be vicious and profane themselves, add unprovoked the further and greater wickedness of persecuting others by ridicule and invective into the same guilt. A persecution, however, far from being formidable enough to afford any tolerable excuse for such as yield to it. The vain, and shewy, and bold, who call themselves the world, and pretend to dispose of contempt and applause as they will, have it not so entirely by any means in their own hands, as they would seem. For, besides that the nature of things cannot be altered; were the number of such persons larger than it is, yet their weight is not answerable to it. And though the wise and good may, in proportion, be few; yet their judgement is, and will be respected by many. So that whoever is truly disposed to be pious and virtuous will never want competent protection, if he doth but seek for it by cultivating proper friendships; but let the generality be ever so bad, will gain, upon the whole, more reputation than he loses, by adhering to his duty.

Yet, supposing this were otherwise, it should be considered, that the esteem of the worthless is very ill purchased at the price of becoming like them: and that the most fatal consequences daily proceed from persons being led by the folly of others, rather than their own good sense, and that of their discreeter and more experienced friends. But above all, it should be considered, how *small a thing it is to be judged of man's judgement*, when *he that judgeth us is the Lord* †: who hath expressly said, what he will assuredly verify, *them that honour me, I will honour: and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed* ‡. Seldom will this fail in the present life: but never in the next: when *they, who sleep in the dust of the earth, shall awake; some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt* §. Therefore, notwithstanding all the censures of this world, *let us run with patience the race that is set before*

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* Matth. xviii. 7.

† 1 Cor. iv. 3, 4.

‡ 1 Sam. ii. 30.

§ Dan. xii. 3.

us ; looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith ; who endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Another case, in which, to preserve a character with their acquaintance, persons will do what every one else, and they themselves often, see to be wrong, is that of party-wickedness. Very frequently prejudices of education, worldly interest, vehemence of temper hurry them into it. But frequently also, their sole inducement is, that if they should stop short, their friends would look coldly upon them, and think meanly of them ; and they cannot bear the reproach of not having been true to their side. What a wretched principle now is this ! And yet tolerably good persons will be carried strange lengths by it : and others, any lengths whatever. We find in St John, that on hearing our Saviour's discourses, *many among the chief rulers of the Jews, inwardly believed on him, but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the Synagogue. For they loved the praise of men, more than the praise of God†.* Now just the same thing, which got the better of their conviction in this respect, gets the better of most men's in one respect or another : and they will not reflect, that as the temptations to raise or preserve a reputation by joining in the excesses of party, are often the most trifling, and easiest to be resisted, that can be ; so, when the trial is harder, the duty is still the same ; but the victory will be the more honourable, and the reward the greater.

A further instance, and a very criminal one, of preferring the good opinion of others to their own conscience is, when persons, having been guilty of some folly or sin, will be guilty of almost any thing to cover it, rather than expose themselves. At one time, they will immediately commit a very great fault to conceal a very small one. At others, they will begin, for that purpose, only with what seems a pretty harmless transgression. But that doth not succeed, perhaps entangles them yet worse : and so they are drawn on, till, instead of confessing at first a single error, they are shamefully convicted at last of many. But if they could, by such means, escape ever so clear, these are not means, by which they ought to escape. Even an innocent person hath no right to use other than innocent

methods

* Heb. xii. 1, 2.

† John xii. 42, 43.

methods for his defence: much less is having done one bad thing an excuse for doing a second. So far indeed as honest prudence will hide our disgrace, we are doubtless in the right to employ it. But if that will not suffice; what we have deserved we must patiently undergo, as a just correction, and salutary discipline to produce repentance. There lies our way back: and it is in vain to seek for any other. If we are disposed to take this only right course, all good persons will think it a duty strictly binding them (for indeed it is an important one) to make our return as easy to us, as possible: never to reproach us more with what we have heartily condemned ourselves for; but hold us in that honour, of which a true penitent may sometimes deserve a higher degree, than those who never offended. And though the world should, as probably it will, do us this justice but imperfectly; yet bearing, in a virtuous manner, whatever shame our faults may bring upon us in this life, will contribute to increase our glory in the next.

One other bad way of aiming at reputation, which must be mentioned, is, when we demolish that of others, to raise our own, and build it on the ruins. Every one feels how grievous this injury is, when done to himself: and therefore knows the wickedness of doing it to his neighbour. Nor truly is the folly much less. Let another person's character in any respect be thought or proved ever so contemptible, or so bad, mine continues but just what it was. And as for any hope, that it may be the more admired, when the other is lowered; on the contrary, it will be observed, who hath taken pains to lower it. And they, who are known to give such treatment, generally meet, as they well deserve, with a double share of it. Candour towards all, of whom we speak, is the true art of obtaining it towards ourselves: whereas *he that hath shewed no mercy, shall, both from God and man, have judgment without mercy* *.

But besides those, who are led into any of these sins by an undue fondness for reputation; they also are blameable, who allow it to give them too much uneasiness. A good name is indeed the most valuable of all earthly things: but, like the rest of them, may be the subject of too much anxiety. If we

* James ii. 13.

are not esteemed by every body as we ought; if unjust imputations are thrown, and, for a time, rest upon us, nay, should it happen to be a considerable time: provided it be not our fault, let us make it as light a misfortune as we can. Perhaps it is for having done our duty, that we are traduced: and what is our case then? *Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake**. Or, supposing the occasion to be not so meritorious; yet it is some alleviation, that these things, in such a world as the present, are of course to be expected. We live among persons that will detract and misinterpret: and truly we are too prone to do like them. Besides, without any ill disposition, they mistake our attainments and accomplishments, we mistake theirs, and it cannot be otherwise. Doubtless we should avoid both making and occasioning such mistakes as far as we can. But, when we have done our best, it is no more to be hoped that the most excellent person upon earth should have from all mankind a perfectly good report, than that the most regular person upon earth should at all times enjoy perfectly good health. Proper care, generally speaking, will secure us tolerably in both respects; at least will recover us again. And, as our health may sometimes be the better afterwards for having gone through a sharp fit of sickness: so may our character for suffering a severe trial. At least, such an exercise of our patience and meekness, if we preserve them, will do us a great deal more service, than the loss of a little esteem can do us harm. But it must be said again, that let persons only be virtuous and discreet, mild and humble, peaceful and charitable; that is, let them be truly good, and take but common precautions, that *their good be not evil spoken of†*; and they will seldom fail of supporting a fair reputation.

As for a high one, that is not so easy to be gained: but neither is it so proper to be much desired. He indeed who is conscious, that, were his merit known, it would enable him to be singularly useful, may and should, if he is sure that this is both true and his true motive, strive earnestly to be conspicuous: but we are strangely apt to deceive ourselves in each of these points. And, if we have little more than self-gratification in view: vehement solicitude, in most cases, gives
more

* Matth. v. 11.

† Rom. xiv. 16.

more uneasiness, than success gives pleasure. But solicitude for fame hath this further unhappiness, that, as very few have really any considerable title to it, most of the candidates for it must be disappointed: and so much the more certainly the more forward they are in their pretensions. For, in proportion as we betray that weakness, we strongly tempt the world, not only to withhold the esteem which we deserve, but even to withdraw that which they had bestowed upon us. And further, if persons will affect to raise themselves to a vast height in popular opinion, though it should provoke nobody to pull their building down, it would, in all likelihood, after a while, overturn itself, or sink under its own weight. Our business therefore is to take the utmost care, that our foundation be solid: but a lofty superstructure is rather to be feared than wished.

And, besides the imprudence of the thing, it is really injustice to demand of the world more regard than we have a right to, and charge them with what they do not owe us. Nor is even this the worst of the case. Persons, who claim too much, are frequently driven to unfair and even criminal methods of getting their claim allowed: and there are many in the world, who would have deserved a very good name, if they had not been too earnest and too hasty for a great one. Here then, the truly valuable reputation is lost in pursuit of a shadow, which is seldom overtaken. To be admired is what we long for: to be disliked and despised is what we usually get. Or, if we succeed better, perhaps the passion, to which we make so costly a sacrifice is only that of being celebrated for some errant trifle: though indeed, be it what it will, every thing is a trifle, compared to a right state of mind and right conduct of life. The reputation of making these things our study is what we should aim at: and as, in virtue, the chief point is, to do nothing ill; so, in character, it is to have nothing ill said of us. After that, it cannot but be desirable to have good said; and, in the main, to know it. But a general and a slight knowledge is quite sufficient. We may have full as much pleasure from that, as will be of any use to us. And listening after particulars, and wanting to hear a great deal of ourselves, both is wrong and leads wrong. They, whose praise is worth having, we may be sure, will never give us a

large quantity of it before our faces. And therefore such as do, either are bad or weak persons themselves, or think us so. At least they take the ready way to make us so. For there is not upon earth a more ensnaring temptation, than that of too fond a self-complacency. Correcting our many and great faults is our proper employment: delighting in our own praises and imagined excellencies, a very unsafe and pernicious one. Let it be our care then to mind our work *by* an humble and *patient continuance in well-doing*: and as to our reward, the less eager we are for it in this world, the more abundantly we shall receive, in the next, *glory, and honour, and immortality* *.

* Rom. ii. 7.

SERMON

S E R M O N LXXXIX.

THE LIBERALITY OF THE GOSPEL SCHEME, IN THE CONTEMPT
OF PARTIAL DISTINCTIONS.

GAL. vi. 15.

*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor
uncircumcision, but a new creature.*

THESE words relate to that first dispute amongst Christians, whether the law of Moses was still to be observed: which, though it hath long been out of question, and now perhaps the difficulty seems to be only, how the observation of such a law could ever be required at all, was yet a very natural subject of controversy, and plainly a very important one, when our religion began to spread in the world: and there is such perpetual reference to it in St Paul's epistles, that they have been greatly misunderstood for want of carrying it in mind. And therefore, I shall, in two discourses on these words,

I. Vindicate the justice and goodness of God in distinguishing the Jews by a peculiar covenant:

II. Give an account of the expiration of that covenant, and its ceasing to oblige or avail any part of mankind:

III. Shew, what alone can avail men; and explain the phrase of *a new creature*, by which the apostle here expresses it.

I. I shall vindicate the justice and goodness of Providence, in distinguishing the Jews, from the rest of the world, by a peculiar covenant.

*God is no respecter of persons: but in every age and nation,
they who feared him and worked righteousness, have always been
accepted*

*accepted with him**. The rewards of innocence, had man continued innocent, would have extended to the whole human race : as did the sad consequences of our first parents fall. From these God equally relieved all their descendents : and received them into a second covenant of grace and forgiveness, on the equitable terms of a sincere, though imperfect obedience, having for its principle, the belief more or less explicit, in proportion as revelation was, that *he is, and is a rewarder of them that seek him*†. This faith saved *Noah, the preacher and practiser of righteousness*‡, with his family, when *all flesh* besides, having *corrupted their ways*§, were destroyed by the deluge : that, after so exemplary a punishment of sin, the world might begin anew from that good man, with better hopes of their observing for the future the laws of the Almighty. Again, to all the descendents of Noah, without exception, God equally delivered his precepts and his promises : nor made any distinction amongst them, till they had made one amongst themselves, by revolting in great numbers from true religion to idolatry and wickedness. And then, as he had enabled them to *see originally, from the things that were made, his eternal power and Godhead* || ; as he had formed them to *be a law to themselves* ¶, by the authority of natural conscience within them ; as he had superadded such strong manifestations of his acceptance of piety and virtue, and his abhorrence of Sin : what ground could there have been for complaint, if he had left them to observe, or neglect at their peril, the notices already given them ; without interposing any farther to direct them in this world ; only reserving for the next such rewards or punishments, as were suitable to their behaviour ? And yet there is reason to think, from occasional intimations in scripture, that warnings and instructions from heaven were still frequently vouchsafed to mankind.

But one man in particular, Abraham, and his descendents, God was pleased to bless, beyond others, with communications of his will ; and admit into a covenant of peculiar favour : which to many hath appeared a preference very partial, and unkind to the rest of the world. But would it have been kinder to bestow this favour on none, than on some ? The rest of the

* Acts x. 34, 35.

† Heb. xi. 6.

‡ 2 Pet. ii. 5.

§ Gen. vi. 12.

|| Rom. i. 20

¶ Rom. ii. 14.

the world were in a worse condition than before, though the Jews were in a better. God did not abandon the general care of mankind, when he took that people into his more especial protection. The other nations of the earth had still a right to all the old promises of mercy, though the Jews had new ones given them. Accordingly we find, after the call of Abraham, Melchizedek, a Gentile, not only an acceptable worshipper himself, but a Priest to others *of the most high God**: and such a one, whose priesthood more fully resembled our blessed Lord's, than that of Aaron did. Again, we find that holy man Job, though a Gentile also, fully equal in God's esteem to any of those, who were distinguished for his chosen people, by the marks of his covenant.

Still if, upon this, we are asked the question, which the apostle supposes to be put, *What advantage then had the Jew?* We answer with him: *much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God*†. From the very time of Abraham's call, he and his posterity had fuller notifications of God's will, and stronger instances of his providential care, than other men. But from the time, when Moses appeared amongst them, they had unheard-of demonstrations of divine power, exerting itself for their deliverance and protection; and a visible appearance of the divine glory, leading them from the land of bondage to that of promise. They had a law delivered to them, with inexpressible solemnity, by the mouth of God himself: and though it may seem hard to account for some part of it, especially to the unlearned, at the present distance of above three thousand years; yet, so far as we have the means of judging, it even now shews itself, on the whole, admirably fitted, in their circumstances, to preserve them from the idolatry and immoralities of their neighbours, and establish amongst them the belief and practice of true religion: to convince them of their inability of fulfilling a perfect obedience; and therefore their need of God's mercy; to prefigure, by the appointment of a ceremonial service, a spiritual one to come; and by the institution of typical sacrifice to be offered daily, the true and efficacious sacrifice and Priesthood of that person, through whom pardon and grace were derived to mankind. Then, besides the establishment of such a
law

* Gen. xiv. 18.

† Rom. iii. 1, 2.

law amongst them, God was perpetually exciting them to good, and deterring them from evil; by the interposition of an extraordinary providence, to reward their obedience, or punish their disobedience; and by the warnings and exhortations of prophets, raised up successively; who also both explained and improved the instructions, which Moses had given them.

These were doubtless great advantages: but that other nations had not the same, is no more an objection against the divine justice and goodness, than that all nations or all men at present have not in all respects the same advantages, that some have. It suffices, that of each shall be required *according to what he hath, not according to what he hath not* *. But as to every thing beyond this, God is master of his own gifts: and we are incompetent judges, how he ought to dispose of them. Yet, in the disposal of which I am speaking, we may trace evident footsteps of wisdom, and extensive mercy. While the rest of the world was falling into superstition and idolatry, Abraham distinguished himself by a faithful practice of true religion: and therefore was properly a distinguished object of divine favour. He was careful also to educate his family in the same principles; as God himself bears him witness. *For I know Abraham; that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment* †. It was therefore no groundless preference, but a most reasonable proceeding; to build on the foundations already laid and remaining; and reward persons, found to be so well disposed, by conferring on them further privileges; of which, with all their faults, they were much likelier to make a good use, than any of their more corrupted neighbours.

Yet to these likewise, and to all men, God had gracious intentions in every thing, which he did for his peculiar people. One of the first promises made to Abraham was, that *in him and in his seed should all the nations of the earth be blessed* ‡. This indeed received not its full accomplishment, till our

* 2 Cor. viii. 12.

† Gen. xviii. 19.

‡ Gen. xii. 4. xviii. 18. xxii. 18.

our Saviour, the great blessing of all nations, came. But it was in some measure verifying continually, from the day it was made. Had all men been left to themselves at that time, the knowledge of true religion might have been every where lost. But securing the profession of it amongst the descendants of *Abraham*, was preserving a witness for God upon earth, and that in a part of it, perhaps as well peopled and as well esteemed, as any then known. There they shone forth, first in *Canaan*, then in *Egypt*, as lights in a dark place*, to attract the eyes and direct the steps of the well-disposed. And this is a benefit of great consequence. For truth proposed is much more easily perceived, than without such proposal it is discovered. And when the Almighty brought them back from *Egypt* to *Canaan* again, by such amazing miracles as the scripture relates, these were so many loud declarations from heaven to mankind, concerning their duty: nor have we reason to doubt, but many were alarmed and convinced by their means: which indeed is expressly mentioned, as one end proposed by them: *And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord*†. Accordingly there went out, we read, a mixed multitude with‡ the *Israelites*: and who could they be, but such as were brought to believe in the true God? For worshippers of false gods they were not to suffer amongst them. Again, soon after this, *Jethro*, a man of high rank, and therefore probably of great influence, amongst the *Midianites*; how strongly doth he declare, what effect these wonders had on him? *And Jethro said, blessed be the Lord who hath delivered you out of the hands of the Egyptians—Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods*§. Further still: where-ever we find in the Law, as we do very frequently, mention of the *strangers, that should sojourn in the land of Israel*; these were many of them indeed no profelytes to the whole of the Jewish covenant, but all of them worshippers of the Maker of heaven and earth only. And though, by the wise direction of God, *Moses* prohibited the admission of idolaters amongst the people; yet by the same direction he enjoined the utmost humanity and tenderness to all, that preserved the religion of the children of *Noah*, or of nature, in any tolerable degree uncorrupted. In the same spirit, *Solomon* too puts up an earnest petition for such, in his prayer

VOL. II.

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* 2 Pet. i. 19. † Exod. vii. 5. § Exii. xii. 32. || Exod. xviii. 10, 11.

at the dedication of the temple. *Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country, for thy name's sake: (for they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched-out arm:) when he shall come, and pray towards this house; hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all the people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel*.*

Nor were the Jews of service only in their flourishing state, to support true religion in the world: but under their afflictions and captivities they spread it much further, than they could before. Whilst they were their own masters in their own land, the peculiar institutions of their law considerably lessened the freedom of their intercourse with strangers. And these restraints, though extremely necessary, as it very plainly appeared, to preserve the purity of their religion, were otherwise great hindrances to the propagation of it. But when they were led captive into the lands of their enemies, and the punishment of their sins had given them a steadier zeal for their duty; then they became extensively useful to the nations, amongst whom necessity mixed them; as both the reasonableness of their faith, compared with heathenism, was easy to be seen; and as prophecies fulfilled, or miracles performed in their favour, could not but recommend the worship of that Being, whom they served. By these means, their conqueror Nebuchadnezzar was brought to declare him, *God of gods, and Lord of kings, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment* †. On these accounts did Darius the Mede decree, *that in every dominion of his kingdom, men should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever* ‡. And Cyrus, whom Isaiah had foretold by name, above 100 years before his birth, for the restorer of the people from their captivity, acknowledged by a written proclamation, sent through his whole empire, that the God of the Jews had *given him all the kingdoms of the earth* §.

Nor is there sufficient ground to think, that these notices of true religion were soon lost again. On the contrary, from them proceeded very probably the great reformation made in
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* 1 Kings viii. 41,—43.

† Dan. ii. 47. iv. 37.

‡ Dan. vi. 26.

§ Ezra. i. 1, 2

the notions of the eastern part of the world, by Zoroaster : whose doctrine and form of worship, was the purest that the heathen knew. And many have apprehended, not without specious appearances of reason, that almost all the whole kingdom of God, which the Greek philosophers had, was derived to them, ultimately, if not immediately, from the revelations made to the Jews. But however that might be; it is certain, that after the time of Alexander, this nation was diffused wider through the world; and, in every city which they inhabited, erected synagogues for divine worship, and for reading and explaining the holy scriptures; to which resorted, as we find in the New Testament, many devout persons amongst the Gentiles, who had learned from the Jews to fear God. And thus, as Isaiah foretold, did the *law go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem**, conveying such degrees of light to all nations around, as prepared them to receive the *Sun of righteousness*, when in the fulness of time he arose, with healing in his wings †.

But though they were instruments of good to the world, they fell at length themselves into pernicious errors. Being distinguished by the observances of their law from other nations, they grew so wrongly vain of those distinctions, which in reality were mortifying proofs of their unfitness to be trusted without restraints, that they placed all the value of their religion in the outworks of it; and despised and hated the rest of mankind, whom this separation of theirs was intended to instruct and serve. Again, having promises made to them of a prince of the house of David, whom all people were to obey, they absurdly imagined, notwithstanding many evidences in their own scriptures to the contrary, that this was to be, not a spiritual kingdom, influencing mens hearts, and protecting them from sin, and rewarding them with eternal happiness; but a temporal one, like those of this world, the honours and profits of which they should share, and tyrannize over the earth. So that when their expected Messiah came, finding him not to answer these vain and wicked hopes, they rejected and *crucified the Lord of glory* ‡. Thus then did the Jews, after *preaching* for so many ages to others, become themselves *cast-aways* §: and have continued ever since under visible

* Isa. ii. 3.

† Mal. iv. 2.

‡ 1 Cor. ii. 8.

§ 1 Cor. ix. 27.

marks of divine displeasure. Yet they perform to this day the office, to which they were at first appointed, of bearing witness to true religion: being preserved a distinct people, though dispersed through the world, for so long a time, as no one besides from the creation ever was, in like circumstances; and demonstrating all the while the uncorruptness of those books, in which both they and we believe, and from which, in a great measure, we prove the truth of our religion, against themselves, as well as other infidels. Nor is this the whole service, of the same kind, to which they are destined. For in God's good time, they shall give a new and illustrious, (and who knows how seasonable?) attestation to Christianity, by their conversion; and the *receiving of them* again into the church shall be as *life from the dead* *. For so their own prophets have foretold, that *God will pour on them the Spirit of grace and of supplications; and they shall look upon him whom they have pierced, and shall mourn: and in that day shall be a fountain opened to them for sin and for uncleanness: they shall call on his name, and he will hear them: He will say, it is my people; and they shall say, the Lord is my God* †.

Thus I have given you, I hope, a sufficient vindication of the divine justice and goodness, in distinguishing the Jews by a peculiar covenant. And now I proceed,

II. To speak concerning the expiration of that covenant, and its ceasing to oblige or avail any part of mankind. You will naturally understand me to mean, that such things only ceased, as were peculiar to the Mosaic dispensation: whether ceremonies in religion, or methods of proceeding in civil government. For what all men were bound to, before the law of Moses, they were certainly bound to, afterwards. And wherever that law was merely an explanation of the law of nature, the explanation was a just and authorised one, and ought to be followed by as many, as come to the knowledge of it.

But the Jewish converts to Christianity, who were the first it had, and, though not the majority of that people, yet a large number, were inclined to carry the matter much farther than this. They were indeed humble and reasonable enough to receive Jesus for the Messiah: but still they were proud enough

* Rom. xi. 15.

† Zech. xii. 10. xiii. 7, 9.

nough to think, that he was sent only to themselves. Accordingly the apostles for some time preached the gospel to none, but their own nation. And when St Peter was satisfied, by a vision from heaven, of the duty of doing otherwise, they that were of the circumcision blamed him for what he had done: till, having an account laid before them of the authority he went upon, *they held their peace, and glorified God: saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life**. But when this difficulty was over, another very great one was immediately started; whether he had granted it on any other terms, than their observing the Jewish law: on which point was held a council at Jerusalem, as you may read, Acts xv. where, after the matter had been thoroughly debated, the apostles, elders, and brethren, directed by the Holy Ghost, unanimously determined, that since the Jews had never been able to keep their own law in strictness; and therefore could not themselves be saved, but through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ; and since the Gentiles, without the law, had not only been purified by the same faith, but had received the same gifts of the Holy Ghost, with the Jews; this was evidence enough, that they were accepted in their present condition, as the prophets had intimated they should: and therefore it was needless and unjust to lay a new yoke upon them, which they had never been enjoined before to undertake, nor would be able to bear now.

But even after this, one doubt remained still, whether the Jews at least ought not to continue observing their own law: For it had been declared in the Old Testament an ordinance to endure *for ever*†. And our Saviour himself had not only, pursuant to its direction, been circumcised in his infancy, but throughout his life was obedient to every precept of the Mosaic covenant: and therefore it might seem requisite, that all his disciples of that nation should be so too. Now contradicting this notion immediately and openly, must, considering how fond the Jews were of their religious ceremonies, have proved a great hindrance to their embracing the faith of Christ. And therefore he did not apprise his very apostles clearly at first of his whole intention, as to these matters; but told them, *that he had many things to say unto them, which then they could*

not

* Acts xi. 1—18.

† Exod. xii. 14. &c.

not bear; but that when the Spirit of truth should come, he would guide them into all truth*. And after they were more fully instructed, they exercised great prudence and patience towards their countrymen: permitting, and even practising along with them, for a while, what they knew to be necessary; and gently loosening their deeply-rooted prejudices. For, when examined with care, they will evidently appear to be nothing more than prejudices. The phrase, *for ever*, used concerning the continuance of the law, is used in that law itself concerning very small periods of time; the term of a man's life, the term of fifty years and less: in short, it means no more, than this; that what is appointed, shall be done, so long as the state of things, to which the appointment refers, shall last. And therefore, notwithstanding such words; when circumstances visibly alter, God may as justly and as wisely repeal any of his laws, as men do many of theirs, into which the same and like words, have been inserted. Now the coming of Christ made a most evident and material alteration. It was indeed very fit, that to shew himself perfectly obedient, and prevent all possibility of cavil against him on that head, he should fulfil the whole righteousness of the covenant, under which he was born. But when he had exhibited the substance of those good things, of which the legal ceremonies were shadows; and completed all that the Mosaic dispensation prefigured, one great end of its existence plainly ceased. When men were grown capable, as God saw they were by that time of a freer, and more spiritual, and manly service, instead of those formal restraints to keep them from going wrong, and those outward carnal ordinances to strike their imaginations, under which they had been placed in the earlier ages, compared by the apostle to a state of childhood†: then a second design of the law ceased. And when the time came, in which God judged it proper, that the Jews, who had been distinguished from the Gentiles, to preserve true religion in the world for their common benefit, should be reunited to them, that they might practise it together, and *be one fold under one shepherd* then the third end of the law ceased; and *breaking down the wall of partition*‡, that is, taking away the ceremonies that separated them, contributed much, not only to the uniformity and beauty

* John xvi. 12, 13.

† Gal. iv. 1, &c.

‡ Eph. ii. 14.

ty of Christianity, but to the preservation of harmony and love, and the avoidance of jealousy and complaint, amongst its professors: besides, that indeed many of the institutions of Moses were calculated for the use only of one small nation, as that nation, to which he prescribed them, was; and neither could possibly be observed by all mankind, nor can be observed by the Jews in their present dispersion.

Yet, weighty as these considerations were, many continued unmoved by them: and insisted, that all men must keep the Jewish law; for that, without it, faith in Christ would not save them. And this is the doctrine, which St. *Paul* in his epistles so zealously confutes, as dishonourable to, and inconsistent with, the gospel. He there shews, that Jews, as well as Gentiles, are sinners; and, far from meriting future happiness by their good deeds, can escape future punishment for their bad ones only through God's mercy, which Christ hath procured for them, and revealed to them: that the law of *Moses* requires perfect obedience; and after disobedience, makes no provision for pardon, but through him, whom its sacrifices prefigure: that therefore, if they sought for justification by their legal works, as they appeared to do, they could not be justified at all; and, if they sought it by the grace of Christ, that singly would be sufficient: and it was doing it a gross injury to imagine, that when the substance was come, the assistance of the shadow was requisite, to make it effectual: that *faith* had not only saved the earlier patriarchs, but even been imputed to *Abraham*, the father of the Jews themselves, for righteousness*, and a promise had been made him, that in his seed should all nations be blessed, before the very first part of the law, circumcision, was appointed; and hundreds of years before the rest of it had a being: and therefore the same faith, only rendered more explicit, might well have the same effect, after the law was taken away: which now only obscured the building, it had helped to raise.

These things make the principal subject of some of his epistles, particularly that to the *Romans*, and this to the *Galatians*; throughout the rest he frequently alludes to them: and bearing them in mind, is carrying along with us the true key to understand his writings; and reconcile him with St
James,

* Rom. iv. 3. 22. 23.

James, when the former faith, that *men are justified by faith, without the deeds of the law* *, and the latter, that *by works a man is justified, and not by faith only* †. St Paul means, that believers in Christ will be saved without the observance of the Mosaic law, or the perfect observance of the natural law, to which our sinful natures cannot attain; and St James means, that believers in Christ will not be saved, by their faith singly, without a sincere, though imperfect, observance of the precepts of the gospel. For, it seems, there were some of wrong minds, who fell into an error, which indeed none of right dispositions could: and hearing the apostles say, that men were *not under the law, but under grace* ‡, and that *Christ hath made us free* § from what the Jews were bound to; either imagined or pretended, that their Christian liberty exempted them from all law, and even from that of the civil magistrate. This, you see, was a most pernicious opinion. And not only St James declared against it, and St Peter too in his epistle, but St Paul is very express, that though, with respect to the Mosaic rites, Christians are without law, yet are they *not without law in regard to God, but under the law to Christ* ||, and, by his command, under that of men also.

This then is the doctrine of the New Testament; that according to the tenor of the gospel, neither the observance of the Mosaic law will justify men, nor the non-observance of it condemn them; but that a thorough change of heart and life from evil to good, effected by the power of God's almighty grace, is the one thing needful: *for in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision: but a new creature*. Now we, in the present age, are so entirely satisfied about the former of these points, that perhaps we think it lost time to hear any thing said upon it; though a way is thus opened, both to understand the sense, and vindicate the pertinence, of a considerable part of the New Testament: and likewise to convince reasonable persons, that other difficult passages of holy writ, if we knew the circumstances to which they refer, might appear equally plain and unexceptionable. But then we are strangely apt, if not to disbelieve, yet to misunderstand the latter part of the apostle's assertion in the text: and

* Rom. iii. 28. † James ii. 24. ‡ Rom. vi. 14. § Gal. v. 1.

|| 1 Cor. ix. 21.

and sometimes, it may be, to think more implied in it, but often less, than really is. And, by such mistakes, we come to rest our salvation on things, that will avail us little more than the observances of the Jews would them. Thus in almost the same manner, that they over-valued that ceremony, which was the entrance into their covenant, we over-value our baptism, which is the entrance into ours; and think well of our spiritual state, merely because a solemn promise was made in our names, of which we have lived in the breach almost ever since. Or if we can plead something more; perhaps it is a formal attendance on prayers, and sermons, and sacraments, without attention and without meaning: or it is the orthodoxy of a belief, that hath no influence on our practice; or the fervency of a zeal without knowledge, or without charity: it is our fits of repentance, and no amendment: our transitory warmth of good affections and fruitless purposes: our partial obedience to some precepts of God's law, with a gross neglect of others: or our imagined obedience to all, with a conceit of our own righteousness and merit that destroys all: these are the things on which multitudes rely; whereas, nothing can secure us from final condemnation, but that which the apostle calls *a new creature*; and which, God willing, shall be further explained to you the next opportunity. But, in the mean time, as we must all be sensible, that we want something, and most of us, it may be feared, a great deal, of being such creatures as we ought; why should we postpone our reformation or improvement one hour longer? So many years have already passed over our heads; and what hath been done in them towards preparing for eternity? If enough to be accepted, let us thank God, and go on our way rejoicing, whatever our condition be in other respects: and press forward, with redoubled earnestness, to obtain a double reward. If we have cause to doubt our state, there can be no doubt so important for us to clear up instantly. And if it be a bad one; if we have lived in the commission of sins, the neglect of duties, the wilful neglect of any one duty; what a prospect have we before us, and what need to change it? Let us think of ourselves as well as we can; are we content, that death and judgement should overtake us just such as we are? or have we not every one something to do, before we are ready?

And if so, when shall it be done? Not a moment, beyond the present, are we sure of: and why should the one thing needful be deferred till the next? Delays are nothing but cheats, that we put upon our souls: and never, I believe, did any one's resolution of amendment hold good, who did not resolve to amend immediately. If then you meant it at all: *now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation* *. And may God, who now calls upon you by me, grant, that *in this our day we may all know the things that belong to our peace*, lest they be for ever *hid from our eyes* †.

* 2 Cor. vi. 2.

† Luke xix. 42.

S E R M O N X C.

THE LIBERALITY OF THE GOSPEL SCHEME, IN THE CONTEMPT
OF PARTIAL DISTINCTIONS.

GAL. vi. 15.

*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor
uncircumcision, but a new creature.*

I N discoursing on these words you may remember I proposed,

I. To vindicate the justice and goodness of God in distinguishing the Jews by a peculiar covenant:

II. To give an account of the expiration of that covenant, and its ceasing to oblige or avail any part of mankind:

III. To shew, what alone can avail men: explaining for that purpose, the phrase of *a new creature*, by which the apostle here describes it.

I have finished the two first of these heads; and shall proceed, without any repetition, to the third: a point the more worthy of your careful attention, both as the subject itself is of the utmost importance, and as the figurative expressions used in relation to it, here and elsewhere in scripture, are not only despised and ridiculed by the profane, as unintelligible or extravagant; but, through inconsiderateness or prejudice, too commonly misunderstood by the serious; who from thence fall into notions, which, if they are not rectified, may greatly affect, often their present peace, and sometimes their future happiness.

To explain the new creation, it will be requisite to begin

with the old. *God created man in his own image**, holy and pure: and unquestionably furnished him with sufficient powers and motives to continue such. But by his miserable fall he became prone to sin, as well as mortal. His primitive uprightness and strength of mind, were, by that pernicious indulgence, depraved and weakened: his affections and appetites grew irregular; and his own *corruptible body pressed down his soul*†. The unhappy disorders, which he had thus introduced into his own frame, he must of consequence transmit, as an hereditary disease, to his posterity: and accordingly, in fact, a tendency to evil, and inability of doing good, is experienced, more or less, by every one that comes into the world. Then as men grow up, instead of correcting their bad inclinations, they never fail to cherish them, if left to their own ways: by which means they become worse of course; generally so much worse, that the nature, which they received at their conception, may be accounted virtuous and good, in comparison with that second nature, which by evil habits they form to themselves. And thus doubly changed, by original defilement and actual transgression, far from continuing to be the creatures which God first made, and preserving that likeness to their heavenly Father, which would give them the title of his sons, they are justly called in scripture the *children of the devil*‡, and therefore the *children of wrath*§.

The divine goodness, however, was desirous to relieve mankind from the ill effects, not only of Adam's sin but their own: and the divine wisdom provided a method of doing it, consistent with the honour of God's government, through the interposition of our blessed Redeemer: which method, from the beginning, was intimated to men sufficiently, though obscurely; and afterwards by degrees more explicitly unfolded. But that he should be reconciled to sinners, wilfully remaining such, was quite impossible. And therefore, together with a provision of mercy on his part, there must also be a provision of amendment on the part of the offenders: and in these two things, inseparably united, the restoration of the human race to a state of happiness must consist. Accordingly we find them closely joined, not only in the more direct and formal declarations

† Gen. i. 27.

† Wisd. ix. 15.

‡ 1 John iii. 19

§ Eph. ii. 3.

cions of scripture concerning this momentous change, but in all the various images, under which it is represented.

Sometimes it is expressed by *adoption*: because that implies our being aliens and strangers, received into God's family and inheritance: but then it implies also an obligation to obey him, as dutiful sons. Elsewhere, by a stronger figure, it is called a *regeneration*, or, which means the same, a *new birth*; because it brings persons forth into a new state of things, where they are to act from other principles than they did before, or would have done else, in another manner, with other expectations, and grow up to the maturity of another character. In some places again, the same happy change is described, as a *resurrection from the dead*: because it raises and restores men, both to the activity of a spiritual life now, and to the well-grounded hopes of eternal life hereafter. But the most emphatical phrase of all is that in the text, of a *new creature*, or creation. The inward condition of man, under the full effects of his first parents transgression, answers too exactly, and yet more after the addition of his own personal guilt, to that account in the beginning of the history of the old creation: *And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep**. But it follows: *And God said, let there be light, and there was light*†. Thus the human soul, in the above-mentioned state, is unformed and disorderly, void of reason and rule, gloomy and comfortless; till God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness ‡, shine upon the dismal chaos, and produce in it new appearances and views of things; till he bring forth order from confusion, and form again in the heart the illuminating image of his own holy nature.

But here it must be observed, that, in some sense and degree, the scripture expressions and privileges of a new birth and creation belong to all, who are admitted by baptism into the Christian covenant, though none are intitled to future happiness by them, but such as complete their right to them, if God allows them time for it, by performing, from a spirit of inward piety, the several obligations of the gospel. When that is preached to Jews or Heathens, every one who believes and is baptized, is *buried with Christ* in that sacred ordinance,
raised

* Gen. i. 2.

† Verse 3.

‡ 2 Cor. iv. 6.

*raised up to newness of life**, and adopted of God for his child. When the infants of believers are baptized, they are, by the solemnity which heaven hath appointed, *born again of water and the Spirit*†, into a better state, than that of nature. And till either sort of persons forfeit their claim by wilful wickedness; which it may be hoped some never do, though *in many things we offend all*‡; they continue heirs of everlasting life. And even when they fall under the dominion of sin; though, were they to die in that condition, future misery would be their portion; and therefore, in respect of any present title to their heavenly Father's inheritance, they are no longer children of God: as earthly sons or subjects, when they rebel, are no longer such, in respect of any right to the favour of their parents or princes: yet as, in other regards, these latter continue sons and subjects still; so the covenant with the former, by which they were made the children of God, subsists, notwithstanding their failure of duty, thus far, that not only by the terms of it, if they persist, they will be condemned, but by the terms of it also, if they repent, they will be pardoned. And neither the penitence nor the forgiveness, of those, who before were initiated into Christianity, and have not since rejected it, is ever expressed in the word of God by the phrase of the new birth or new creature, but these are appropriated almost, if not altogether, to our original admission into the gospel state; into which we enter once for all, by one baptism, *the laver of regeneration*. Nicodemus, to whom our Saviour, in St John, gives instructions on that head, was not then become a Christian. The *Galatians*, of whom St Paul saith *he travaileth in birth again, until Christ be formed in them*§, either had apostatized from the faith intirely, or wanted, not the whole, but the completion only of the new birth, by juster and fuller conceptions of the gospel doctrine. Nor is there the least appearance elsewhere in the New Testament, of telling any professed believer, though he had sinned ever so grievously, that he must be born again; (otherwise the same person would be born again as often as he falls into any great wickedness, and recovers from it:) but that he

* Rom. vi. 4. † John iii. 5. ‡ James iii. 2. § Gal. iv. 19.

he must *repent, and do the first works**, and *be renewed in the spirit of his mind†*; which belongs, in its degree, to the best of good Christians. And therefore, though inculcating perpetually, that *without holiness no man shall see the Lord‡*, is indispensably needful; yet reaching the necessity of being regenerated, as a thing still absolutely wanting, to a great part of those who call themselves disciples of Christ, is using a language, not conformable to that of scripture, nor indeed of the primitive fathers, or the offices of our own liturgy: which declares every person, who is baptized, to be, by that very act, *regenerate, and grafted into the body of Christ's church*. It is true, a different manner of speaking may be capable of a good interpretation, and should be interpreted as favourably as there is room. But it is neither accurate, nor prudent, to depart from the authorized sense of the words of *sound doctrine*: and much less is it allowable to blame others for adhering to them.

The first and immediate meaning then of the apostle in the text, we have cause to think, is, that under the Gospel, neither entering into the Mosaic covenant by the appointed form will do a man service, nor the want of it do him harm: and that being received, by baptism, into a new state of grace and mercy, is equally, necessary and equally sufficient, for Jew and Gentile. But then, being admitted even into this state will avail us nothing finally, unless we live suitably to the laws of it. And as, in the natural world, God's preservation of things hath often been called a continual creation of them: so in the moral, the same notion is more evidently right. The complete sense therefore of the gospel creation comprehends, not only the giving of spiritual life at first, but supporting it in us afterwards. And we shall find the whole of our religious being, as well as the beginning of it, to deserve the name of the new creature on two accounts;

I. Of the power of God necessary to it.

II. Of the change in man's condition made by it.

I. Of the power of God, necessary to it. Now this power he hath exerted, not only by giving us originally the light of reason and conscience, and superadding to this the directions and motives of external revelation; but by inwardly operating

* Rev. ii. 5.

† Eph. iv. 23.

‡ Heb. xii. 14.

ting on our hearts through his Spirit, exciting and forming us to piety and virtue, and restraining us from transgression, in such a manner, that whatever good we perform, and whatever evil we avoid, not we by our own strength do it, *but the grace of God, which is with us* * : *by grace we are saved, through faith, and that not of ourselves ; it is the gift of God* † : *for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, unto good works* ‡. This Doctrine the scripture throughout teaches. We know not indeed, how God influences our minds : for we know not how he doth any thing. But assisting his fallen and weak creatures is so worthy of him ; and the belief of that assistance is so productive of thankfulness and love, humility and pious resolution ; that surely we must admit it on his plain testimony and we can hardly lay too great a stress upon it, provided we are careful not to pervert it, either into a plea for our own negligence, or an imputation upon his justice.

If we imagine ourselves absolutely incapable of doing any thing towards our reformation from sin, or improvement in goodness ; we excuse those who become and continue wicked, as having no means given them to act otherwise ; we charge their guilt upon God, for with-holding such means from them ; and make it unjust in him to punish them for the worst things they do. For no punishment is just, where there is no fault : and it can be no fault to behave, as we never could help behaving. Besides, all the commands and exhortations of scripture, all its earnest reasonings and affectionate expostulations, have for their ground-work the supposition, that man is able, as he chuses, either to receive *the grace of God, which bringeth salvation* §, or, generally speaking, to reject it. We own, the spiritual creation, as well as the natural, is in appearance wholly ascribed to God in some places of holy writ : But, in appearance also, wholly ascribed to man in others : as, *make you a new heart, and a new spirit : for why will ye die, O house of Israel* ||. And we are to understand the various texts of scripture consistently : not to stretch figurative expressions, till we force them to contradict literal ones, and evident reason too. Else, if we conclude, that because the wicked are described as *dead in sins* ¶, they can take no step towards good ; we must conclude

* 1 Cor. xv. 10.

† Eph. ii. 8.

‡ Verse 10.

§ Tit. ii. 11.

|| Ezek. xviii. 31.

¶ Eph. ii. 1.

conclude also, that because the religious and virtuous are described as *dead to sin* *, they can take no step towards evil : which the very best of us all knows to be false. And likewise, if we argue thus, we must condemn or misinterpret many clear passages of the New Testament besides : particularly that of St Paul, *awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light* †. Still we readily grant, that nothing of this can be done otherwise, than by the strength which God furnishes : but he furnishes to every one, that hears the gospel, strength sufficient. The true scripture doctrine therefore is, that divine grace enables and excites men to do their duty: that some wilfully refuse to be guided by it, and fall; while others concur with it, and *work out their own salvation, God working in them both to will and to do* ‡. But,

II. Our Christian life is also called a new creation, to express in a strong manner, how greatly our condition is changed by it for the better : according to that of the apostle, *If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature : old things are passed away, behold all things are become new* §. But here again, we must guard against mistakes.

It is not true, that, in strictness of speech, fallen man hath originally no principle of what is right left in him. If the whole was lost by the fall, somewhat hath by the general grace of God been restored since. For, though St Paul saith, *In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing* ||, yet he saith of the same person, quickly after, *I delight in the law of God after the inward man* ¶. And he supposes even *the Gentiles* to do, in some cases, to some degree, *the things contained in the law* *. Indeed experience proves, that notorious finners have often a considerable mixture of worthy dispositions. We are not therefore to look on those dreadful pictures, which the sacred writers draw, of the most depraved of the heathen, as being just representations, without abatement, of the natural state of all mankind. But however, that state is undoubtedly a bad one; destitute of sufficient strength, unintitled to pardon of sin, to supplies of grace, to reward of obedience : till God, in the covenant of baptism, affords us relief in all these respects ; and so *translates us from the power of darkness into the kingdom*

VOL. II.

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of

* Rom. vi. 2. † Eph. v. 14. ‡ Phil. ii. 12, 13. § 2 Cor. v. 17

|| Rom. vii. 18. ¶ Verse 22. * Rom. ii. 14.

of his dear Son *. Here then begins our new creation or birth: and our remaining concern is, to behave as dutiful children to our heavenly Father; and by using the prescribed means of spiritual growth, be careful to arrive at fullness of stature and strength in Christ. The first creation was not completed in a moment, but gradually finished in the space of six days: after which, Adam was left to cultivate the garden that God had planted. The second hath no certain time prescribed it: but advances faster or slower, with fewer or more frequent interruptions, to greater or less perfection, according as men lay hold on, or neglect, the assistances always ready for them.

Some are *trained up*, and walk from the first, *in the way wherein they should go* †: and though guilty of many small errors, through infirmity and surprise, yet, avoiding great and wilful deviations, they advance continually to a happy end of their journey. Now these cannot well perceive any sudden change in the condition of their souls; for their improvement is usually very gradual: much less any change in it from bad to good; for it hath always been good from their earliest acquaintance with it. Too many indeed may imagine this falsely: but others, through God's mercy, may know it to be true, that they have always lived religiously, from genuine Christian principles. Like Timothy, *they have known the holy scriptures from children, which are able to make them wise unto salvation* ‡. And such, far from having reason to doubt their acceptance with God, because they have never experienced grievous terrors and bitter sorrows, have the highest reason to rejoice, that they have found the *ways of wisdom pleasantness and peace* §, from their very entrance upon them: and shall be rewarded in the end for a whole life, spent as it ought.

But far more commonly, men have committed heinous offences, or indulged themselves in the omission of important duties. And then more particular and deep repentance is necessary: followed by a change of dispositions within, as well as external behaviour: else their baptismal regeneration will only aggravate their guilt. But even the conversion of such is not always accompanied with extremely vehement agitations

* Col. i. 13.

† Prov. xxii. 6.

‡ 2 Tim. iii. 15.

§ Prov. iii. 17

tions of mind: but these differ, according to their various tempers, and the free operations of the divine Spirit. Nay, indeed, some feel the most tormenting agonies, yet harden their hearts against them and go on: while others are effectually amended by the influence of mild convictions and a calm concern. And whether it be a call loud as thunder, or whether it be a *still small voice* * that speaks: if we do but hearken to it, all is well.

Nor is the recovery of sinners always equally sudden. Some, like St Paul, are awakened and enlightened instantaneously, throw off a habit of wickedness at one effort, and are changed that moment into newness of life. Others, after their first alarm, long maintain a doubtful struggle with their vicious inclinations: one while seeming to have fought the good fight successfully, then entangled anew in their former bondage: a painful and dangerous situation: out of which notwithstanding, through almighty grace, there are those who escape *into the glorious liberty of the children of God* †. And to a third sort, whose disorders, though but too threatening, are less violent, health is restored by slow, and gentle, and almost imperceptible steps. Now, it may be as impossible for these to fix the precise time, when their faith and penitence were carried just far enough to make them objects of God's forgiveness, as it often is to determine exactly the moment when the sun rises upon the earth, though it hath evidently been growing light a great while. Without question, as soon as any one hath that faith in Christ which will produce a life of good works, he is justified by his faith alone, and his sins forgiven. But though God always knows this time exactly, men very often may not, or rather very seldom can. They may have comfortable hopes and persuasions, first weaker, then stronger: and yet, through mere humility, may entertain some doubts, not of the divine promises, but of their own qualifications, longer than they have cause. And these doubts may be graciously permitted, as very useful incitements both to diligence and caution. Our Bible no where teaches, that every one, who is forgiven, knows the hour of his forgiveness: or even knows with certainty, that God hath granted it. He must indeed, as he amends, perceive the alteration made in him:

4 C 2

and

* 1 Kings xix. 12.

† Rom. viii. 21.

and in general, a pleasing hope and faith of sharing in the divine mercy must increase along with it : but he may still not be sure, whether it is yet complete enough to be a proof, that he hath obtained pardon. Some are *weak in faith** : others are *strong*† and *abound in it*‡. But conceiving ourselves to be of the latter sort, gives us no title to pass sentence against the former. And we should be very fearful of judging our Brethren rashly ; who, with all their modest apprehensions, may perhaps have as real, perhaps a greater interest in God's favour, than some of those who declare them to have none. And yet, if these hard censures proceed, not from ill will, or bitterness of spirit, but from the warmth of a well-meaning zeal, even the persons injured by them should think mildly, and, in the main, well, of the authors of them, least they retaliate hardship, while they complain of it.

But further, as the spiritual life may, in different persons, be attended with different degrees of evidence, it may likewise advance to different degrees of perfection. Indeed, when God created the heavens and the earth, he *saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good*§. Nor, in the new creation, is any part of what he doth defective. But even pious persons are wanting to themselves : and hence some of them come greatly short of others ; and the best, of what they might and ought to have been. For, though all Christians are exhorted to perfection, and all real Christians labour after it, and, in God's gracious construction, finally arrive at it ; and some have the title given them by way of eminence, on account of their uncommon proficiency : yet, speaking strictly, *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*|| ; nor did even St. Paul think, *he had already attained, or was already perfect*¶.

But here, as before, it is of the utmost importance not to err. They, who allow themselves in the habitual omission of any one known duty, or the habitual practice of any one known sin ; they who have committed any single act of deliberate gross sin, without heartily repenting of it, and carefully avoiding it afterwards ; are not good persons with imperfections, but wicked ones under guilt and condemnation. The
imperfections

* Rom. xiv. 1.

† Rom. iv. 20.

‡ Col. ii. 7.

§ Gen. i. 31

|| 1 John i. 8.

¶ Phil. iii. 12.

imperfections of the good are of quite another kind: slight weaknesses, sudden surprises, inconsiderate failures, undiscerned unreasonableness in temper and behaviour; honestly watched against upon the whole, yet returning from time to time, subjects of daily concern and general humiliation. Let no one therefore flatter himself, that because all men have their faults, he may wilfully indulge his without danger. Nor let any one be so absurdly cunning, as to think of making a near bargain in religion: and contriving to be just so good as to escape future misery; and yet no better, than he needs must. Though we aim to do our utmost, we shall be sure to fall beneath the rule of our duty: but if we aim at less, we shall be too likely to fail of the acceptance of our Maker. True goodness includes in it the love of goodness. No one can be religious and virtuous in earnest, without sincerely desiring to be more so; and feeling the truth of what Wisdom, in the son of Sirach, asserts of herself: *they, that eat me, shall yet be hungry: and they, that drink me, shall yet be thirsty: for my memorial is sweeter than honey; and mine inheritance than the honey-comb* *. Such therefore, as are, perhaps in no respect, positively either vicious or profane, but negligent and thoughtless; willing to go to heaven, with as little trouble, and as much indulgence, as ever they can; and, of the two, rather more afraid of being over good, than downright bad; are already, to speak the most favourably of them, in a very unpromising condition; and, unless they make haste to get into a better, will soon be in a worse.

Another thing still, to be observed concerning the new creation, is, that as it may be carried to different degrees of perfection, so it may be attended with different degrees of comfort. Nor is there any proof from scripture or experience, that persons equally pious are filled in this world with equal joy and consolation. They, that have a greater share than ordinary of such delightful perceptions, ought undoubtedly, if the tenor of their lives afford cause for them, to be very thankful. But such as have the least, if *their hearts condemn them not*, may have confidence towards God †; and be assured, that the smallness of their present degree of comfort *shall work together with all other things for their future good* ‡. Indeed the very
same

* Eccclus. xxiv. 21, 20.

† 1 John. iii. 21.

‡ Rom. viii. 28.

same persons, without any other change in their spiritual state, find, at times, elevations, depressions, insensibilities, for which they can only account by variations, visible or supposed, in their bodily health, or God's unsearchable will and pleasure. Again, very bad people too often *trust in themselves, that they are righteous**; and rejoice on groundless presumptions; while, on the other hand, though the good must, in their composed hours, feel some satisfaction in the hope, that they are such; and therefore every one ought to reflect, whether he hath, on serious thought, felt that satisfaction, or not; yet the light of God's countenance hath been frequently withdrawn from some of the best of men, and *their souls disquieted within them*†. Nay, even our Saviour complained, that, in respect to the cheering influences of his presence, *God hath forsaken him*‡. So that no one can justly think well or ill of himself on such accounts, as these. The Psalmist hath told us, that *they, who sow in tears, shall reap in joy: and he that now goeth on his way weeping, and beareth forth good seed, shall doubtless come again with joy, and bring his sheaves with him*§. And the prophet hath stated both this case, and its opposite. *Who is among you, that feareth the Lord, and obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God. Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, and compass yourself about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow*||.

The only sure evidence therefore of the goodness of our condition, is the sincerity of an obedience, flowing from motives truly Christian. And accordingly, what the apostle calls here in the text *a new creature*, he calls, in a parallel place of the preceding chapter, *faith working by love*¶, and in another, *keeping the commandments of God**. So that when he saith, the new creature will avail, and nothing else, he saith it on supposition of its being so compleated, as to answer its end: which end unless we are careful to attain, by exerting the principles of the spiritual life conferred on us in baptism, and growing up in all Christian graces; however great a blessing in

* Luke xviii. 9. † Psal. xlii. 6. ‡ Matth. xxvii. 46. § Psal. cxxvi. 6, 7.

|| Isa. l. 10, 11. ¶ Gal. v. 6. * 1 Cor. vii. 19.

in itself our sacramental regeneration is, it will be none to us: but we had better not have been born, better not have been new born, if it only intitles us to privileges, that we finally forfeit; and become, to use St Jude's expression, *twice dead* *. Our Saviour hath told us, that the *tree is known by its fruit* †. And the *fruits of the Spirit* are the virtues of a holy life ‡. If we experience these, we have a mark of our acceptance with God, which cannot deceive: all other marks, all other feelings, be they ever so lively, ever so pleasing, may. Doubtless, *if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his* §. Our pious dispositions, our well-grounded comforts, all proceed from the Holy Ghost: and we can have neither, without perceiving them. But we may perceive them, without certainly knowing, by the manner of the perception, that they are his work: it suffices, that, on the authority of scripture, we believe they are. And scripture hath no where taught us to distinguish, what impulses, or sensations within us, come from God, and what from a different source, by the mere strength and delightfulness of them. Without question, clear and joyful persuasions of our interest in the divine favour, if we have foundation to judge that we are intitled to them, are the greatest felicity that we can enjoy in this world. But whoever relies on such persuasions alone, instead of examining what ground they stand upon, exposes himself to the utmost danger of being misled by a heated imagination, of a sinful confidence: of which kind of delusions the history of the church in all ages hath been full. And whoever determines either his own state towards God, or that of any one else, to be a bad one, for want of such tokens of its being a good one, contradicts the rule of holy writ. *Every one, that doth righteousness, is born of him* ||, and unwisely dejects himself, or uncharitably condemns his Brother.

Let us therefore be very cautious not to fancy the paths of religion either narrower or broader, than they are: neither to *make the heart of the righteous sad, whom God hath not made sad*; nor *strengthen the hands of the wicked, by promising him life* ¶: for of both these errors we may be guilty at once.

But

* Jude ver. 12. † Matth. xii. 33. ‡ Gal. v. 22. Eph. v. 9.

§ Rom. viii. 9. || 1 John ii. 29. ¶ Ezek. xiii. 22.

But in order to avoid both, let us form our notions of ourselves and others by God's unerring word, interpreted with the reasonableness and mildness of a truly Christian temper; and then we shall quickly discern, that the only sure test of good and bad persons is that, which St John hath so solemnly delivered from above: *This then is the message, which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say, that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, that is, wickedness, we lie, and do not the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, if we studiously imitate the purity and holiness of our heavenly Father, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son, cleanseth us from all sin* *.

* 1 John i. 5, 6, 7.

SERMONS

S E R M O N X C I.

THE DEATH OF STEPHEN, A PATTERN OF FAITH AND FORGIVENESS.

ACTS vii. 59, 60.

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit.—And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

AS the interests of religion and virtue require that due regards be paid to the memory of pious and good persons; and as they, who have laid down their lives for God and their duty, have given the strongest proofs of their attachment to the noblest cause; so the Christian church hath, from the beginning, shewn distinguished honours to those professors of its holy faith, who have sealed their Testimony to it with their blood. The first Martyr, or witness, of this kind, after the blessed Jesus himself, was St Stephen, a man *full of faith, and of the Holy Ghost, and of power, and of wisdom* *, whose death is related in the text. And we find in the next verse but one, that *devout men carried him, with decent solemnity, to his burial, and made great lamentation over him*; undoubtedly mixed with equal triumph, that he had finished his course in so exemplary a manner: nor were they withheld from it by fear of the resentment, to which so public an instance of respect must provoke his murderers, and all their adherents.

VOL. II.

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Two

* Acts vi. 3, 5, 8, 10.

Two of the most ancient monuments of ecclesiastical history, that we have, excepting the New Testament, are the accounts of the martyrdom, of Ignatius and Polycarp, both disciples of St John, written, at the time of their suffering, by the churches of Antioch and Smyrna, of which they were bishops. And in those they mention, as of course, their purpose of celebrating yearly the festival of their birth-days, of their entrance into a better life, for the commemoration of their excellent graces, and the incitement of others to imitate them. Thus did they provide, that *the righteous should be had in everlasting remembrance**: and observed the more particular direction, given to that intent in the epistle to the *Hebrews*: *Remember them, which have [had†] the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God; whose faith follow, considering the end, the event, of their conversation.* The rest of the primitive churches appear to have followed the same rule: and each to have honoured the more eminent of their own martyrs, who had been usually their teachers also, by anniversary assemblies for preserving the reverence due to their characters, and offering up thanks to God for their examples.

But the increase of their numbers, and the adoption of the sufferers of one church into the liturgies of others, and the admission of eminently good persons, who had *not resisted unto blood‡*, and the frequent grants, which in subsequent ages were made of so high a distinction, with little care of previous inquiry, multiplied the returns of these solemnities very improperly and inconveniently. Then besides, a still greater evil was, that praises and panegyrics too soon grew to be immoderate, and afterwards impious. In the vehemence of oratorical encomiums and exclamations, the saint was called upon as present, till by degrees he was thought so: and what at first was merely a bold and moving figure of speech, became at length, in good earnest, a prayer; which requested of a dead man, who was unable to hear it, not only that he would intercede with God in behalf of his fellow-servants, but that he would himself bestow such blessings upon them, as no creature hath in his power. Things being found in this condition at the Reformation, it was necessary, both to abolish intirely

* Psal. cxii. 6. † So it should be translated, Heb. xiii. 7. ‡ Heb. xii. 7.

entirely these unlawful addresses, and to limit the original sort of commemorations to a moderate list of persons, indisputably worthy of them. Accordingly no day is appointed by our church for the celebration of any other, than the principal saints, mentioned in the New Testament, it being hard to stop, if more were added. And amongst these, St Stephen is the only one, who stands solely on the foot of being a martyr: as indeed it was fit, that the foremost, the leader, of that *noble army* should be distinguished, and chosen as it were, to represent the rest. Now we shall keep his festival in a due manner, if we make use of it to place before our thoughts,

I. The sinfulness of persecution for conscience sake.

II. The excellency of bearing it well.

I. The sinfulness of persecution for conscience sake.

Taking away the lives, the fortunes, the liberty, any of the rights of our brethren, merely for serving their Maker in such manner as they are persuaded they ought, when by so doing they hurt not human society, or any member of it, materially, is evidently inconsistent with all justice and humanity: for it is punishing those, who have not injured us; nor is it less inconsistent with policy and common prudence. For thus many will be driven from amongst us, who might have been very useful: and such of the same opinion, as stay behind, will be tempted to become either open or secret enemies, in order to free themselves from the hardships which they suffer, and revenge themselves on the authors of them: from which motives have proceeded the bloodiest wars, the most shocking massacres, the most heinous barbarities, that have ever disgraced human nature. Or should men comply against their judgments, and live quietly; from being hypocrites in the great point of their religion, they will too probably grow dishonest in others. And though their posterity may at length be sincere; and so what we think truth be promoted in our part of the world: yet if the rest should be induced by our example to promote what they think truth, in the same way, it will by no means be a gainer on the whole. Fair argument and equitable behaviour are the natural methods of spreading it: and it will never thrive by any opposite ones. This being the case, imagining that God can enjoin religious cruelties, or fail to be displeased with them, is thinking so unworthily and absurdly of him, that few things are more fur-

prising, than the wide extent and long prevalence of so monstrous an error. And nothing distinguishes this age and nation more to its honour, than its entertaining in general so right sentiments on the subject before us.

When and where persecution began, hath been controverted. Some have charged the Jews with giving the first example of it, by extirpating the Canaanites, and punishing idolatry with death amongst their own people. But the Canaanites were extirpated, not for harmless religious opinions or observances, but for monstrous and unnatural cruelties and impurities, practised in their worship and out of it: by which, continued through many generations, their iniquity, being at length, as the scripture expresses it, *full**; God appointed the Israelites, as appeared by the evidence of numerous miracles, to execute his vengeance upon them: which command was probably designed to give them a greater abhorrence of the like enormities; and certainly they were bound to obey it. But they neither claimed any right else to punish those nations; nor any right at all to punish other nations, though guilty of the same crimes.

Nor amongst themselves were they authorised to proceed criminally against any persons on account of their faith or devotions, excepting the adorers of the neighbouring false deities; or of the true one by an image. Now such of those deities, as had been men, had been such dangerous patterns of wickedness; and the service of them all was so full of detestable abominations, that paying them any honour must be of very bad consequence; but paying them those, which they were understood to claim, worse than atheism itself. And setting up images of the true God had so strong and immediate a tendency to lower the reverence of him, and bring him down to a level with the rest, that the mischief was only one degree removed. Besides, it no way appears, that the Hebrew idolaters held it their duty to be such: but licentiousness, or mistaken policy, or love of novelty, or some wrong inducement of that sort, led them to adopt the divinities of their neighbours; still believing in Jehovah, though practically they forsook him. And therefore, as conscience did not require their false worship, it was not injured by the prohibition

* Gen. xv. 16.

bition of it. Nor must we forget, that God having condescended to be their supreme civil magistrate, as well as the object of their adoration; owning another god was treason, as well as idolatry: which never was the case of any one nation in the world besides.

It is therefore amongst the heathens, that we must look for the origin of real persecution. Yet, we confess, most of them tolerated, and even incorporated, a great variety of deities, and modes of worship: because they supposed, that the former might be all true, and the latter all acceptable. And therefore it was not readily concluded from a man's having a religion of his own, that he denied that of the state. But when there seemed cause to apprehend that he did, it was deemed, in some of the freest constitutions, a capital crime: as the known case of Socrates fully proves. There were indeed but but few such punishments, because there were but few such offences, real or pretended: for men usually spoke and acted as the laws of their country prescribed, whatever they thought: till the Jews, in their captivities and dispersions, refusing to worship any other god, than the one invisible Maker of heaven and earth, provoked, by so doing, Pagan bigotry; and, instead of being the first persecutors, were amongst the first martyrs; indeed to true piety were the very first, Socrates having always conformed to the religion of Athens, and being unjustly condemned as rejecting it. Yet as the Jews were not commanded to propagate their faith, but only to profess it, which however did propagate it in some measure; the number of their sufferers for conscience sake, except in the time of the Maccabees, was very small, when compared with those of the primitive Christians.

For the apostles of our blessed Lord, their companions and successors, being intrusted by him with a commission the most beneficial to mankind that ever was; that of notifying to the Jews, that their promised Messiah was come; of converting the Gentiles from idolatry, and teaching all men the genuine love of God and their neighbour, as the way to eternal happiness; became, for undertaking this good work, (though they proceeded in it most respectfully to magistrates, and inoffensively to all men) objects of public rage, instead of Gratitude. Nor were they only, but their followers of both sexes, pursued with warmer zeal, and destroyed by more exquisite torments,

torments, than the vilest malefactors : nor was the continuance of these barbarities, excepting some intervals, much less than three hundred years. Yet none of them were retaliated, when, in spite of them all, our faith, by its own reasonableness, and the unwearied patience of its adherents, had prevailed, and was become the reigning one : not even the bitterest persecutors were punished for all the murders, which they had committed. Nor did any erroneous Christian suffer death from a Christian magistrate for his errors, for a long while afterwards : nor was any law made for that end, I believe, in one thousand years from our Saviour's coming. In process of time indeed the rulers of the church of Rome, having already introduced other corruptions into our holy profession, supported them in introducing this also. But when they were become persecutors, much truer and more orthodox Christians became once more willing martyrs. Amongst these our first reformers were eminent : since whose days, liberty of conscience and the religious rights of mankind have been asserted on more solid grounds, in a fuller extent, and with greater consistence, than ever was done before. Nor I hope will the members of our communion ever forget to exercise, either due caution against the open and secret attempts of those blood-thirsty and faith-breaking tyrants, or due moderation towards all, who peaceably dissent from us.

And they, who accuse Christianity of the cruelties, committed by the professors of it, should consider, how much its genuine professors abominate even the smallest of them, and every tendency to them. But indeed these our adversaries, who would seem to abhor a persecuting spirit beyond all men, and complain of our religion, as encouraging it, have singular need to examine, of what spirit they are themselves : and whether they do not by false imputations, and *cruel mockings* *, the only weapons which they have at command, persecute, most unrighteously, (without any pretence of conscience to oblige them to it) both Christian faith, and natural piety, without sparing, in several instances, even moral virtue. A proper sense of their own vehemences would incline them to excuse, as far as possible, those of other men, and restrain them from going on to bring charges against the innocent and guilty, promiscuously.

* Heb. xi. 36.

miscuously. But though we were all as bad in this respect, as they imagine the worst of us to be, it would by no means affect the truth of the scripture doctrine, which is far from encouraging force in matters of faith. The patriarchal religion is free from all shadow of blame in that respect: the Jewish hath been sufficiently vindicated: and the Christian fully clears itself. Our blessed Lord reproved his disciples, when they would have called down fire from heaven on the *Samaritans*; who, besides being both heretics and schismatics, had used him personally ill; and told them, *that the Son of man was not come to destroy mens lives, but to save them* *. And though in a parable he uses the words, *compel them to come in* †; both the whole of the context, and the whole of his instructions, particularly those which he gave to his apostles when he first sent them forth, irrefragably prove, that the only compulsion intended was that of cogent reasons and pressing exhortations. Accordingly St Paul plainly asserts, that *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal* ‡, but that we are to *instruct in meekness those that oppose themselves* §. We are not then authorized to raise persecution; but, on the contrary, commanded patiently to suffer it. And therefore I now proceed,

II. To shew the excellency of this duty: and particularly, as practised by the first Christians.

I have already observed, that as most of the heathens thought all religions might be true, they were in little danger of suffering for any: and amongst such, as thought their established faith and worship false and even mischievous, few or none had the patriotism to declare against it, or the sincerity to refuse complying with it. The Jews, who, so long as they observed their law, were assured of national prosperity, had small need of precepts to undergo persecution for it willingly: which however they did undergo with admirable fortitude, when the sins of the people in general had brought the pious part, along with themselves, into distress. And it is a moving description, which the epistle to the *Hebrews* gives of their sufferings. *They had trial of mockings and scourgings, of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were slain with the sword: they went about in sheepskins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented; of*
whom

* Luke ix 54, 55, 56.

† Luke xiv. 23.

‡ 2 Cor. x 4.

§ 2 Tim. ii. 25.

whom the world was not worthy: they wandered in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth *.

Their afflictions however were only occasional consequences of the idolatry of their countrymen. But Christianity set out from the first with our Saviour's predictions to his disciples, that *they should be hated of all nations, delivered up, and killed for his name's sake* †; with their predictions to their converts, that *all, who would live godly in Christ Jesus, must suffer persecution* ‡; with immediate and dreadful examples of these truths; with the express command, *be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life* §. And faithful accordingly they were to such a degree, as nothing but consciousness of truth, and divine assistance, could possibly make them.

The apostles gave no proofs of courage in the first part of their history. They all deserted our Saviour, as soon as ever he was apprehended: one of them was terrified, without any particularly great occasion, into denying him: and even after his resurrection, nay probably his ascension too, they kept their assemblies very private, *for fear of the Jews* ||: What was it then, that changed them into such different persons, within the space of a few days? What could it be else, than the completion, recorded in the Acts, of our Saviour's promise, *Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem and all Judea, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth* ¶. With what surprising boldness, immediately upon this, doth the late apostate, St Peter, *standing up with the eleven, lift up his voice, and say, ye men of Judea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words* *: *let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, Lord and Christ* †? This was not a passionate and inconsiderate courage. For what had there happened, that could raise it in them all? And what could possibly be milder and more rational, than their uniform temper and behaviour: which, their answer to the threatenings of the rulers, both so resolutely and decently expresses? *Whether it be right in the sight of God, to hearken unto you, more than*

* Heb. xi. 36, 37, 38. † Matth xxiv. 9. ‡ 2 Tim. iii. 12.

§ Rev. ii. 10. || John xx. 19. Acts i. 13, 14. ¶ Acts i. 8.

* Acts ii. 14.

† Verse 36.

than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.*

As they bore testimony, not merely to doctrines and opinions, but to plain and repeated, though miraculous facts, of which their senses were perfect judges, they could not mistake. And what could they hope for by attempting to deceive? They must each of them know themselves to be every way unqualified for conducting a fraud of this nature. They had seen just before, that they could not trust, either to the bravery, or the fidelity, one of another. Or if they could, a great part of what they said might easily be confuted notwithstanding, if it was not true. For aught appears, they might have returned to their former occupations with great safety. But if they went on in this new way: they knew the magistrates were vehement against them; they saw the people, at best, would do nothing to support them; and the fate of their master was full before their eyes. In these circumstances, worldly advantage could not be their motive. And fondness of acquiring glory amongst their followers was not likely to overbalance the fear of punishment, in men of their education; especially in a number of them; besides that, humanly speaking, they could expect neither glory nor followers. And in fact they were held in the lowest contempt by most men, and honoured but by few. Or should we suppose, that, contrary to all probability, and to the express notices given them, they looked for better treatment in carrying on their undertaking; than they found: yet when they perceived their disappointment, would no one of them have been so honest, as to own his error, and detect his accomplices; or at least so wise, as to withdraw himself out of harm's way? Would they all have gone on, year after year, supporting persecution and death, one after another: neither taking warning nor complaining, but rejoicing and triumphing? Hear only, what a description St Paul gives of their and his own condition. *God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: we are made a spectacle unto the world:—even unto this present hour, we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place; and labour, working with our own hands;—we are made as the filth of the world, and are the off-scouring of all*

things unto this day *. Could they have chosen to bear this from any other principle, than that, which he elsewhere mentions? *We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed: perplexed, but not in despair: persecuted, but not forsaken: cast down, but not destroyed. We are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh:—knowing that he, which raised up the Lord Jesus, shall raise up us also by Jesus:—for which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perishes, yet the inward man is renewed day by day* *. Nor were they affected in this heroic manner, only while death might possibly be at a distance from them; but the nearer it approached, the more they felt of the same Spirit. *I am now, saith St Paul, ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day* †. Can there be words in language more expressive of conscious integrity, and composed fortitude?

But this was far from the whole excellence of that frame of mind, with which they met sufferings. Could they have delighted themselves with the thought of vengeance falling on their adversaries, either from men or from God, in the present life or the next, it might possibly have given some poor consolation and support to corrupt nature under torments and death. But their Master's rule was, *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you* ‡. Had he meant only to harden them into a bold unfeeling obstinacy, he would never have required of them such tenderness of kind affection towards adversaries: a temper so very inconsistent with all the common excitements to courage in resisting them. And had they found themselves unable to attain such exalted virtue, to which none almost before them had even made pretensions, they would have concealed or dropt his precept, or explained it away. But, on the contrary, they professed it to its full extent. *Though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, that is, universal love to all men, it profiteth me nothing* §. And they practised it, as they professed it. *Being reviled,*

* 2 Cor. iv. 9, 11, 12, 13.

† 2 Cor. iv. 8, 9, 11, 14, 16.

‡ 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

§ Matth v. 44.

|| 1 Cor. xiii. 3.

reviled, we bless : being persecuted, we suffer it : being defamed, we intreat *. They expressed all the kindness, they made all the excuses, for their persecutors, which they possibly could. Thus the same St Paul : *I have great heaviness, and continual sorrow in my heart,—for my brethren, who are Israelites † : my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record, that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge ‡.* Nor was this their manner of speaking, only when at ease, or when they could hope to obtain favour by it : but, as the case of St Stephen shews, their sentiments were the same, under the certainty, under the actual pains, of death itself, even when suddenly and tumultuously inflicted on them. For he prayed at once to the Lord Jesus, with his last breath, to receive his spirit, and to forgive them that stoned him.

Such was the blessed temper of the first witnesses to the Christian faith : and their successors inherited a noble degree of it. They could not indeed give any equally strong testimony to the original facts, on which it was built ; but they attested many subsequent ones of great importance. And not only their embracing it, as they did, contrary to all the prejudices of common opinion, and all the dictates of every wrong inclination, makes it necessary to presume, that they must have had powerful evidence for it : but their perseverance in professing it, amidst every thing terrible in life or death, fully proves them to have been thoroughly sincere, and singularly magnanimous. Indeed it proves further, that more than ordinary strength was vouchsafed to them from above. For though natural constancy and bravery have in some instances performed wonders, yet the performers have been few in proportion : whereas the primitive Christians in general, of both sexes, all ages, all ranks, underwent the most grievous inflictions with the calmest patience. Observe too : they could have little hope of distinguishing themselves in the opinion of their fellow-christians by suffering. For though a few of the principal martyrs were highly honoured, yet the rest were too numerous, either to be remembered after their death, or have notice taken of them at the time of it. Nor did their intrepidity arise from being trained up to the resolution of

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martyr-

* 1 Cor. iv. 12, 13.

† Rom. ix. 2, 3, 4.

‡ Rom. x. 1, 2.

martyrdom. For this would often have failed: and besides, new converts, just made, as boldly suffered death as any others; nay, sometimes persecutors themselves became converts on the spot, and died with those, whom they had brought to execution. Still it was not merely a sudden vehemence, which they caught one of another. For not only particular persons had often the leisure of long imprisonments to cool in: but the whole church had many and considerable intervals of peace. Yet, whenever persecution began again, it found the generality of Christians in the same spirit, which they shewed before: respectful in the highest degree to civil authority; but unmoveable to an equal degree from their duty to God: where they were ever so few, not to be forced or persuaded into the slightest act of idolatry; where they were ever so many, not to be provoked into a single attempt of rebellion; or into making or joining any party or faction for their own security; though the frequent changes in the state gave them inviting opportunities for it. In the comfortless exercise (for so it must appear to common spectators,) of this cool passive courage, infinitely more difficult than the active and enterprising fort, they patiently persevered for three hundred years. The wonderfulness of the behaviour moved men to inquire into the grounds of it: they found them good; they came over; and the empire was become in effect Christian, before the emperors ceased to persecute.

The unjustifiable veneration, addressed by the church of Rome to saints and martyrs, hath deterred almost all the reformed churches, except our own, from paying them even due honours. And now, amongst ourselves, prejudice against religion in some, and indifference to it in others, hath made these excellent persons be regarded commonly, either with a malignant or a negligent eye. But if they, who have acted or suffered gallantly, for the liberties or other interests of a single nation, have been revered by distant ages, and all their faults hid under that one virtue: how much higher esteem do such patriots deserve, as have borne testimony with their blood against the tyranny of idolatry and immoral superstition; who have lived in misery and died in torment, to assert the faith of one wise and good Maker and Ruler of all, of pardon for sin, and assistance in virtue, derived to us by methods of infinite, though mysterious goodness; who have given to mankind,

both

both by their doctrine and example, the justest rules of worthy and prudent conduct in this life ; and spread through the world an assurance, founded on God's express promise, (which alone could support it,) of endless felicity in a life to come ! should our accounts of them be ever so imperfect, or meanly written : should any of them appear no otherwise great, than as they were admirably good men : should their zeal have sometimes transported them beyond discretion ; (though such transports were few, and always condemned by the body of Christians :) Or should other, and even considerable, frailties be found mixed with the excellencies of some of them : yet, so long as we know that they were, and did what hath now been mentioned ; we have surely cause to hold them for ever in most honourable estimation, and respect the gospel of Christ much the more highly on account of such witnesses to its truth and efficacy.

But admiring them is nothing, unless we also imitate them, in their solicitude for its advancement, in their steady adherence to God and their duty, in their contempt of worldly advantages and pleasures, losses and punishments ; in their meekness under injuries, in their resignation under pains and afflictions, in their love to their fellow-christians and fellow-creatures, in their lively faith of a future recompence. We are not called, as they were, to *take joyfully the spoiling of our goods* *, to *suffer trouble, even unto bonds, as evil-doers* †, to undergo shame and torture, and to *die for the name of the Lord Jesus* ‡. No *temptation hath taken us, but such as is common to man* §. Ordinarily speaking, we have nothing to perform, but what conduces on the whole to every one's present benefit : and we have nothing to bear, on account of our religion, but perhaps a little trifling ridicule from the vain and the vicious. Even such persecution indeed is very wicked in them ; but need not in the least be formidable to us. And if, for that alone, we are ashamed to *confess our Saviour before men*, well may we expect that he should *deny us before his Father, which is in heaven* ||.

Let us therefore *boldly* *fast the profession of our faith without wavering* ¶ : never do any thing inconsistent with it for temporal

* Heb. x. 34. † 2 Tim. ii. 9. ‡ Acts xxi. 13. § 1 Cor. x. 13.

|| Matth. x. 32, 33.

¶ Heb. x. 23.

poral prospects or fears : never pay court to the irreligious, by mean compliances with their talk or behaviour, in hopes of better quarter from them ; for it will be much harder to stop afterwards, than to maintain our present ground : yet never be moved, either to passion against them, or uncharitableness towards them ; but freely own their good qualities, while we carefully preserve an abhorrence of their bad ones ; pity their unhappiness, while we condemn their sins ; and earnestly pray, that they may repent and be forgiven. For thus shall we *adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things* * ; and be *followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises* .

* Tit. ii .

† Heb. vi. 12.

S E R M O N X C I I .

RELiance ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD, UNITED WITH A PROPER
RESPECT TO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING IN OUR ADDRESSES
TO THE ALMIGHTY.

I COR. xiv. 15.

*—I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding
also : I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the under-
standing also.*

THESE words, in their first and strictest sense, relate to those gifts of inspiration, which the primitive church enjoyed : the Holy Ghost then frequently enabling many members of it, besides the apostles, to *speaking in tongues*, which they had never learned, *the wonderful works of God** ; and dictating to them petitions and praises fitted to their circumstances. But, as the ordinary gifts of Heaven to mankind are left to be managed according to the discretion of those, who enjoy them : so the divine wisdom preserved an uniformity of conduct, and kept to the same rule, in respect of these extraordinary ones. *The spirits of the prophets*, as the apostle tells us, ver. 32. *were subject to the prophets*. It was in their choice, when they would use the power of speaking with divers tongues : and on what occasions they would produce the prayers and hymns, with which they were inspired. In this, (and no wonder,) they did not all of them judge always prudently : their thankful zeal to publish these miraculous favours, and perhaps a too great, but very natural, self-complacency in being possessed

* Acts ii. 11.

fed of fuch remarkable privileges, prompting fome of them fometimes to give demonstrations of it in their assemblies, when few or none were prefent, who understood the language they fpoke : in which cafe, the exercife of their endowments was only a hindrance to the ftated, and though lefs admired, yet more ufeful devotions and instructions of the congregation in their native dialect. And therefore St. Paul, in the true fpirit of Chriftianity, reproves this oftentation: reminds them, that the gift of tongues was defigned to convince unbelievers by a feafonable ufe of it, not to provoke their fcorn, or bring diforder into the church, by an unfeafonable one; that the other gift of PROPHECYING, teaching men their Chriftian duty, and exhorting them to the practice of it, (for this the word means here, and this the Jewifh prophets made their chief bufinefs,) was a much more valuable thing, than that of fpeaking to them, or to God, in languages known to few of them; which therefore they fhould do modestly and fparingly; never indeed, but when the fpeaker, or fome one prefent, was able to interpret what he faid fo readily and properly, as might edify the hearers; for their conftant endeavours fhould be to exert all the powers of this kind, which the Holy Ghoft had beftowed on them, rationally and difcreetly, fo as to inform and improve others. *I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding alfo: I will fing with the Spirit, and I will fing with the understanding alfo:* that is, every perfon endowed with fupernatural abilities, of this or any other fort, was to think himfelf bound to employ them in fo difcreet a manner, that all around him might be instructed and benefited, as much as poffible.

This, you will find, on careful reading it, is the meaning of the text, and of the chapter in which it occurs. And the whole fhews, both the truth of extraordinary and miraculous gifts at that time; (for had they not been real, no directions about them could have been wanted, or would have been given;) and alfo the admirable wifdom and genuine goodnefs of the apoftle, in which we may well prefume the reft to have been like him. He permitted not thefe accomplifhments, wonderful and fhining as they were, to interfere with the plain rules of order and edification; or to be at all fet on a level with the humble virtue of Chriftian charity, doing good to
men

men from love of God. Now such things as these are great confirmations of our holy religion, and do it great honour.

But though the first and immediate meaning of the text be what I have now explained; a more general instruction, and applicable to every age of the church, may be justly drawn from it. The same Divine Comforter, who inspired the devotions of believers then, influences their hearts in the performance of them now: the same duty of using due precautions to make the service of the church intelligible, which the apostle pressed so strongly in his own time, equally subsists in ours: And therefore the words which I have read to you, comprehend two points of doctrine, as needful at present as ever they were.

I. That good Christians are assisted by the Holy Ghost in offering up their petitions and praises. *I will pray with the Spirit: I will sing with the Spirit.*

II. That we should be very solicitous rightly to apprehend the sense and fitness of what we say and do in God's worship, *I will pray, I will sing, with the understanding also.*

I. That good Christians are assisted by the Holy Ghost in offering up their petitions and praises to their heavenly Father. The *Spirit of God* hath *striven* with bad persons *, and therefore doubtless effectually operated on pious ones, from the beginning of the world. The Psalmist, on his falling into sin, prays that God would *not take his Holy Spirit from him* †. And more especially God promises, in the prophet Zechariah, that he will *pour* on his people *the Spirit of grace and of supplication* ‡. In the New Testament we are told, that *if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his* §; that *the Spirit helpeth our infirmities in prayer, making intercession for us* ||; that we are to *pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit* ¶, and *praying in the Holy Ghost to keep ourselves in the love of God* *.

But though it be undeniable, that the Holy Spirit, who indeed excites us to, and fits us for, every duty, doth not withhold his influences in this: yet how far they extend, is matter of dispute; and particularly between those who approve,

VOL. II.

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and

* Gen. vi. 3. † Psal. li. 11. ‡ Zech. xii. 10. § Rom. viii. 9.

|| Verse 26. ¶ Eph. vi. 18. * Jude 20, 21

and those who disapprove, liturgies or forms of prayer. And which are in the right, it shall be the principal business of this discourse to shew: not with intention to raise in you either hatred or contempt of any, who dissent from our Church on that head, (God forbid!) but only to make you more sensible of the propriety and advantages of the way you are in; and incline you to that proportionable improvement by it, which God will expect.

Some then apprehend, that there is such a gift, or spirit of prayer, bestowed by the Holy Ghost on true Christians, and peculiarly on all that are worthy to be ministers of God's word, as enables them to address themselves to Heaven, on all occasions, copiously and suitably, in unpremeditated words of their own: which they think ought not to be restrained by appointing forms, even for the public use of congregations. And sometimes the text is quoted in support of this opinion. But plainly, so far as it relates to words it relates to words inspired; to which, in the strict sense, but few of these persons themselves lay any claim: for indeed it would be equalling their own compositions to the holy scripture. And excepting this miraculous gift of inspired prayer, the word of God mentions no gift of ready expression in prayer: nor have we the least ground to consider it as coming from above, any otherwise than as *every good gift*, every natural ability, which God hath conferred upon us, and every improvement, which he qualifies us to make by our industry, *is from above* *. For evidently this talent is one of that sort: depending, partly on the fluency of speech, to which people are born, partly on the art and diligence, which they use to increase it; and varying, as their health and spirits vary. Nor therefore is there any more harm in restraining this faculty, if good reasons require it, than in restraining any other. Even the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, you have seen, were frequently put under some restraints: much more then may one of our ordinary powers. And they who call it limiting and stinting the Spirit, have no scripture warrant, either for the phrase, or the thing which they understand by it. Nay, supposing the Holy Ghost did ever so peculiarly assist in directing the words of prayer, why should we not think him as likely to have assisted in the drawing up of the established forms, as in the extempore performances

* James. i. 17.

inances of those who reject forms, and trust to the sudden dictates of their own fancy?

The *spirit of prayer* and *praying in or by the Spirit*, are indeed scripture terms: but, so far as they belong to the present age they signify, not being furnished with variety of phrases in prayer, but a much more valuable blessing, having religious affections breathed into us by the Holy Ghost, for the exercise of this duty. And *quenching the Spirit**, in the only sense, which can be applied to us, means extinguishing such affections, by indulging sin, or suffering them to die away through negligence. God is no more delightful with change of expressions, than with a repetition of the same: nor will ever be weary of a devout soul, for want of new language. Common reason pronounces this: and the bible confirms it. We find several forms of prayer, prescribed on several occasions in the law of Moses†. We find afterwards a whole book of forms, the Psalms of David. We find our Saviour frequenting the Jewish synagogue, which constantly used a form and a very mean one. We find him enjoining his disciples a form of his own composing for them: *When ye pray, say Our Father*‡, and so on. Nay, at the very time, when the gift of inspired prayer was common, there is a strong appearance in the fourth chapter of the Acts, and the apostles and their followers used a form, there set down. For how else could *they lift up their voice, and say it with one accord*, as ver. 24. assures us they did? Probably the very next age after them practised this method of public worship, at least in a good measure: and for more than 1400 years past it hath been without question almost universally the only one. There is not at this day a Christian church in the world, but what uses in part of their service, if not throughout it, forms of human composition; except that of Scotland, which had one immediately upon the Reformation, though it afterwards fell into disuse; and the dissenters from our own, who notwithstanding, many of them sing in their assemblies hymns that are forms of human composition, without scruple. Yet if extempore prayers be required, extempore praises are too. For it is equally said, *I will pray with the Spirit*, and, *I will sing with the Spirit*.

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* 1 Thess. v. 19.

† Numb. vi. 22, 23, &c. x. 35, 36. Deut. xxi. 7, 8. xxvi. 13. ‡ Luke xi. 2.

It may be replied indeed, that supposing forms of prayer lawful, they are not however expedient. But if that be all, so long as the vastly greater, and the ruling part think otherwise, ought not the rest to acquiesce? Is it not much less expedient to make a separation and division in the church, when Christ and his apostles have so strongly prescribed unity and submission?

But why are forms of prayer inexpedient? It is argued, that they cannot be altered according to circumstances, which extempore prayers may. And, with respect to private devotion, the argument is so far of weight, that though even in this, forms well chosen are excellent directions, yet no one should confine himself closely to them, when his condition, spiritual or temporal, requires him to depart from them: but should omit, or add, or vary, as he perceives occasion; in which he may well hope, that God's holy Spirit will guide him, so far as is needful. But the circumstances of whole congregations, taken together, are in the main almost always the same: and therefore may be expressed in the same words. Besides, public offices make a stated provision for the more usual accidents that happen: and public authority provides for the rest occasionally, from time to time. Indeed, an established liturgy doth not allow the cases of private persons or families, or the situation, real or supposed, of national affairs, to be enlarged on to God, at the discretion of the minister: a thing never necessary, and seldom proper. It is very sufficient, that they who desire the rest of the assembly to join with them in petitions or thanksgivings on fit subjects, relating to themselves, have opportunity afforded them of signifying their desire: and that general expressions in the service may be applied more especially to particular purposes by each member in his own mind, as he conceives there is need. If these things be carefully done, forms of prayer will be found not so often defective perhaps in the matter of uncommon and extraordinary wants or mercies, as extempore prayers in what is far more necessary, expressing common and ordinary ones.

But some insist, that whatever may be said, they experience, that forms do not edify, and excite devotion. And this may be true, while they are unaccustomed to them, and come with prejudice against them. But would they make trial of them for some time, with a serious endeavour of receiving benefit

nefit from them, they would not fail to find that true fpirit of piety raifed by them in their own hearts, of which we hope they would fee many instances in their fellow-worshippers. It is true, a form doth not afford the entertainment of novelty. But that hath nothing to do with devotion. The hearer may be highly delighted, the fpeaker highly admired: and all this may be mere amufement of the fancy, and no prayer in reality offered up by him, who is beft pleafed with it. What alone deferves that name, is a reverent application to God, from a deep fenfe of our neceffities and bleffings, and his power and goodnefs: which a form deliberately precompofed by the joint counfels of a number of perfons, whom the public wifdom hath chofen for that end, is furely more likely both to excite, and to exprefs fitly, than the hafty produce of each private minifter's invention: efpecially as he is expected by his people to vary even this continually, though it be for the worfe.

One man will doubtlefs excel another in this way: and fome perhaps may, really or feemingly, furpafs at fome times the public forms. But what multitudes would there be, who, through inability, careleffnefs, want of memory, diffidence, or imprudence, would fall vastly fhort of them, were every minifter in the nation to ufe, every time he officiates, a new prayer of his own devifing upon the fpot? How often doth it happen, were we to know the truth, amongst the fmall number of our Diffenters, that the perfon praying hesitates and is at a lofs, omits things neceffary or ufeful, expreffes himfelf obfcurely, improperly, irreverently, works himfelf into gellures and accents by no means edifying, not to fay worfe? All which muft grievoufly hurt the devotion of thofe, who defire to pay God a *reasonable fervice**; and bring thoughts into their minds, extremely unfuitable to the work in which they are engaged. Then what danger is there in this way, that men may fill their public addreffes to Heaven with their own private, it may be abfurd and pernicious, notions and opinions: that national prayers may change, like fafhions and fancies, and the faith of Chriftians change along with them; which the weight and authority of an eftablifhed liturgy greatly contributes to keep ftedfaft, and preferve from noxious errors?

What

* Rom. xii. 1.

What danger is there also, that persons, either by ill design, or ill judging zeal, may mix their interests, their passions, their party-attachments of various kinds, with the requests and thanksgivings, which they utter in the name of the congregation; may inflame one part of a neighbourhood, one part of their fellow-subjects, against another; stir up some to mischief, under colour of its being the cause of God; and, by so doing, make his worship abhorred by the rest? I am far from charging the body of those amongst us, who use extempore prayer, with being guilty of these things now. I am only representing, what evils a more general use of it would be likely to produce, especially in times of public discord. Indeed most of them, if not all, it formerly hath produced: and preventing them is much easier, and every way better, than punishing them.

But supposing these inconveniences avoided, another, very considerable, would remain. Let their dislike of forms be ever so great, the words of their minister in praying are as absolutely a form to them for the time, as the words of a national liturgy: but with this unhappy difference, that his expressions being continually varied, possibly the most judicious, at least the slower and more ignorant, may often doubt of their meaning; and the scrupulous of their fitness: and though, upon consideration, they should be satisfied, yet he in the meanwhile is gone on to something else. And thus they may follow after him through the whole of a prayer, and be able to overtake and really join with him in but a small part of it: whereas a form may always be examined beforehand; and when it is once understood and found to be right, our judgement and affections will go together in the use of it, without let or hindrance; and we shall be edified, not in imagination, but reality.

Upon the whole, the reasons for a public liturgy are so strong, that Calvin, the most universally esteemed by our dissenting brethren of all the reformers, in a letter to the protector of England, under Edward VI. hath these words. "*As to a form of prayer and of ecclesiastical rites, I highly approve that it should be certain, from which it may not be lawful for any minister to depart: as well in consideration of the weakness and ignorance of some, as that it may more plainly appear, how our churches agree amongst themselves; and lastly, that*

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a stop may be put to the progress of any who would do this."

Still I am sensible, that some of the arguments, which I have urged against devotions composed by the minister, may seem to lie equally against sermons composed by him; and to require, that instruction be in a constant form, as well as prayer. But, besides that one hath been the *custom of the churches of God**, the other not; prayer is the voice of the people to their heavenly Father; and should therefore be preserved, with singular caution, from every thing, which they ought not to say, or may not immediately comprehend or approve; else, in such parts of the service, either they do not pray at all, or they pray amiss. But preaching is the voice of the minister to the people, which they may weigh and judge of at their leisure: and even should they fail of learning their duty from thence, they may learn it from a much higher authority, the lessons of scripture read to them. Further, where a fixed form of worship is appointed, instruction may be left at liberty more safely; because it will be observed, if the latter contradicts the former: and also very usefully, because a much greater variety of things is requisite to be said to the people in sermons, than is needful for them to say to Heaven in their prayers. But how proper soever it may be to have some form, they, who dissent from us, apprehend there are such great imperfections and faults in the established form, that if they must *pray with the spirit and with the understanding*, they must not pray by that. Now, imperfections will be found in every thing human: and if these be a sufficient objection against our prayers, it will hold against their own and all prayers, excepting that of our blessed Lord. From every thing unlawful we are ready to prove that our service book is intirely free. But the faults of extempore devotions, which are different in every congregation, and every time of meeting in the same congregation, easily escape the notice of such as are prejudiced in their favour, who alone hear them; and when observed, it is only by a few, and they are soon forgotten: while those that are charged on a public printed liturgy, lie open constantly, year after year, to the censure of every one. And were it possible, that the several prayers offered up, in any one day, in the several dissenting assemblies of this kingdom, could be written down;

* 1 Cor. xi. 16.

down; and examined half so narrowly for a short space, as ours have been for two centuries together: can it be imagined, that many times more and worse omissions and improprieties would not be found, in almost every one of them, than they have pretended to find in our common prayer? Still we are far from saying, it is incapable of any alteration for the better. Yet this we must say, that most of the alterations, proposed by some persons, have been thought by others, every way their equals, if not superiors, by no means to be amendments. And as eminent a nonconformist as ever was, Mr Baxter, hath long since owned, that almost every church on earth hath a worse liturgy than ours.

There hath indeed been *a railing accusation**, even of Popery, brought against it: though it was first compiled, then reviewed and approved, by Confessors and Martyrs for the Protestant cause; and several articles of Popery are as flatly contradicted in it, as can be. Some parts of it, we acknowledge, were in the Romish offices before: but not one tenth of the whole, as a very diligent person hath computed†. Most of this tenth part also was in much ancients offices, before the Romish corruptions were introduced. And had it not; as even these prayers are intirely free from those corruptions, where can be the harm of using them? Had our Reformers rejected them, they would have been in reality never the farther distant from the papists. And by retaining them, they had a prospect of bringing many of the papists over to themselves: by shewing, that they did not act from passion and prejudice, but reason and consideration; that they respected the ancient offices and usages of the purer ages of the church, and departed only from modern abuses and errors.

It hath also been alledged, that we wear the habits of the Papists in offering up these prayers. But indeed, though it were no way material if we did, ours are very different from theirs. And if wearing any, which are not in common use, be condemned, what cause is there for it? why may not sacred, as well as civil offices of dignity and importance, be made somewhat more solemn by vestments appropriated to them? The fitness of it hath been confessed by the constant practice of mankind, and particularly of the Christian church in early ages,

* Jude ver. 9.

† Dr. Bennet on the common-prayer App. 1.



ages, and indeed of our Dissenting ministers themselves; who change their dress a little, when they officiate. And where is the harm, if we change ours a little more? Though, after all, if the wearing of such garments by us of the clergy were a fault, it would be intirely our own fault: and seeing us wear them could surely hurt no body.

But besides these general objections, there are several made against particular passages, which ought to be confuted. This therefore I purpose, God willing, to do in a proper number of discourses, on all the stated offices of our Liturgy: and not only to vindicate what is blamed, but explain also what too many may possibly not understand, and direct your notice to what may not be sufficiently observed. All these things will very well come under the head, of which I promised at first to treat.

II. That we should be very solicitous rightly to apprehend the sense and fitness of what we say and do in God's presence. For though censuring without reason is worse, yet esteeming without reason is not the part of wise men. And some perhaps are mighty zealous for our Liturgy, who yet know but very imperfectly, what good reason they have to be zealous for it. Indeed, amongst many advantages of public forms of prayer, there seems to be one disadvantage; that the words of them being in the main continually the same, and thus becoming well known and familiar, we often hear them, and even speak our share of them, with scarce any attention to them. But then it is equally true, that we often hear sermons, tho' they are new to us, with just as little regard; and therefore should be likely very soon to hear extempore prayers also with no less negligence: which fault our Liturgy is in several respects peculiarly calculated to prevent, as I shall hereafter shew you. But still the danger is great enough, to demand our utmost care to guard against it. For however good our public offices are in themselves, they convey no good to us, farther than we comprehend the import of them, and mind it: which, the better they are, the more they deserve from us. And, on the other hand, were they ever so mean, this would be no excuse for omitting to get all the benefit we could from them; but a powerful motive, though a very unhappy one, to endeavour it most earnestly. Yet thinking them defective and

blameable where they are not, or to a degree in which they are not, as multitudes have done, will naturally discompose, or deaden at least, our minds in the use of them : and therefore, should be avoided, as far as it can. Now, persons may indeed by their own private consideration enter very competently, both into the meaning and the grounds of most things contained in the Liturgy. They, who are able to purchase a few books, may likewise receive much additional information from the several very useful paraphrases and commentaries upon it, that are extant. And they are much to blame, if they wilfully neglect either of these things. But still many cannot, and others are not likely to do them. To such therefore I shall attempt to give some instruction concerning the service, in which we join so often. The fewer need it, the better : but those who do, it is of importance to assist. For with the more understanding we pray, with the more pleasure and earnestness we shall pray. And as on our praying, as we ought, depends our obtaining God's grace and blessing ; so on that depends our only true comfort in this world, and our eternal happiness in the next.

SERMON

S E R M O N · X C I I I .

RELiance ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD, UNITED WITH A PROPER
RESPECT TO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING, IN OUR ADDRESSES
TO THE ALMIGHTY.

I COR. xiv. 15.

—*I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding
also : I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the under-
standing also.*

FROM these words I have proposed to discourse on the two
following subjects :

I. That good Christians are assisted by the Holy Ghost, in
offering up their petitions and praises to God. *I will pray
with the Spirit : I will sing with the Spirit.*

II. That we should be very solicitous rightly to apprehend
the sense and fitness of what we say and do in his presence. *I
will pray, I will sing, with the understanding also.*

The former of these heads I have finished: and, after pro-
ving its truth, I made it my chief endeavour to prove further,
that this aid from above is not such, as to afford any argu-
ment against using public forms of prayer; of which I shew-
ed you both the lawfulness and the expediency: answering,
at the same time, some general objections against our own e-
stablished form; but reserving the more particular ones for
the second head: under which I promised to vindicate the
principal things, which have been blamed in the stated offices
of our Liturgy; to explain such as may seem hard to under-
stand, or liable to be misunderstood; and direct your atten-

tion to such, as you may not otherwise observe sufficiently. To this I shall now proceed, following the order of the book.

But it will be proper first to take notice of the laudable custom, that every one, who comes to join in the devotions of our church, should perform at his entrance into his place, a short preparatory act of worship in private. Now this, as well as every thing else, ought to be done *with understanding*: not to be an unmeaning formality, in ignorant compliance with common practice; but a serious address to God, that he would enable and incline us to attend in such manner to what we are about to hear, and say, and do, that we may honour and please him, edify our fellow-worshippers, benefit and finally save our own souls. For which purpose, either these very words, which I have mentioned, may be used; or any others of the like import, chosen by ourselves; or, as perhaps is more usual, those expressive and excellent ones, that conclude the 19th psalm: *Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my Redeemer.* Only, whatever our expressions are, we should be extremely careful not to make so very bad a beginning, as to put up this previous request either thoughtlessly or insincerely. And the same care should employ our minds throughout the whole. For that end, we should avoid, as much as we can, all needless, but absolutely all light and ludicrous conversation, even before the service begins. And after it is begun, the fewer of the more transient intercourses of civility are exchanged, the better. For surely they make a very unsuitable mixture with the awful words, which we are hearing, or perhaps repeating, at the same time: and must in some degree take off our attention from them. Nor will it be a less hindrance of our devotion, to remark over curiously, what other persons are present, what appearance they make, or how they behave. Let not these directions, I intreat you, either give offence, or be despised. Very good people, I fear the very best of us all, transgress them inadvertently, more or less. But a moment's reflection will shew any one, that there is great propriety in observing them: and they will experience more advantage from it, than perhaps they expect.

Our service begins, as did that of the primitive church*,
with

* Sacerdos ante Orationem, Præfatione præmissa parat Fratrum mentes.
Cypr. de Orat. Dom.

with a preface, to dispose more completely the minds of the congregation to a reverent performance of the duty, on which they are entering: according to that precept of the son of Sirach, *Before thou prayest, prepare thyself**. And this preface is composed of sentences of scripture, with an exhortation grounded upon them. Nothing can so effectually awaken us to a pious frame of soul, as the words of God, speaking to us. And the words, here used, are very prudently selected. They all relate to repentance and confession of sins: which naturally stands first in the devotions of guilty creatures, as we all are. Till we feel a genuine sorrow for having offended God, and come to intreat earnestly the pardon, which is offered us through Christ, he cannot accept us: and when we do, that will qualify us for every other part of his worship.

In these texts, (you may turn to them in your prayer-books, and go through them along with me) we are plainly taught the nature of true penitence: that *the wicked must both turn away from his wickedness, and do that, which the law enjoins as right, to save his soul alive*: that we must not only *acknowledge our transgressions* with our tongues, but have them *ever before* the eyes of our minds, to keep us humble and cautious; on which we may pray, in faith of being heard, that God will treat us with the same kindness, as if he *hid his face from seeing our sins, or blotteth them out from his memory*: that he requires from us, neither the fanciful *sacrifices* of superstition, nor the expensive ones of the Mosaic dispensation; but that of a *spirit contrite* with filial sorrow, and *broken* to universal obedience; not outward expressions of vehement passion, as *rending the garments*, but a *heart* rent and penetrated with a just sense of what we have done amiss: that on such a change within we shall find him, not only *slow to anger* for what is past, and *ready to repent him of the evil* which he was bringing upon us, but bountiful and gracious for the time to come; *though we have deliberately rebelled against him* heretofore, and still too often inconsiderately neglect to *obey his voice, and walk in his laws*: that we have cause to be willing, and even desirous, that he should *correct* us, when he sees it expedient; but to beg he would do it *with* that mild and merciful *judgment*, which he exercises towards his children,

not

* Eccius. xviii. 23.

not with anger, as his enemies, which would bring us to final destruction: that repentance is absolutely and immediately necessary for us; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; the hour, when we shall, each of us, be admitted into it or excluded out of it for ever, draws very near, and how near we know not: that therefore we must resolve to arise and go to our heavenly Father without delay, and acknowledge our unworthiness to be called his sons: that whatever we may be in our own eyes, or the opinion of our fellow-creatures, were we to undergo a human trial only; yet if God enter into judgment with us, in his sight shall no man living be justified: that therefore to extenuate our faults, and say or imagine, that we have no sin, or but little, would be a fatal self-deceit, and a proof against us, that we know not, or own not, the truth of our case: but if we honestly recall to ourselves, and confess to God the errors of our past life, not only his mercy, but his faithfulness and justice to his promises will induce him, both to forgive us the guilt of our sins, and to cleanse us from the defilement, and deliver us from the dominion, of all unrighteousness.

It is true, but few of these sentences are usually read at the same time: but it will be very beneficial for such as come soon enough, to meditate on them all before the service begins.

The first words of the exhortation, *Dearly beloved brethren*, express very strongly and properly the good will and tender regard, which the ministers of God's word should have for their people: who should in return receive their admonitions meekly and thankfully, since they *speak to them the truth in love* *.

A following part of the exhortation reminds us, that *altho' we ought at all times, even in our private supplications, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we most chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together*. Our Saviour hath laid a peculiar stress on joint prayers; and made more especial promises to those petitions, which his disciples put up in common†: both to unite them closely in mutual affection, by the mutual benefits they receive at each other's request; and to encourage a practice, which he foresaw would prove
so

* Eph. iv. 15.

† Matth. xviii. 20.

so powerful a means, both of their own edification, and the conversion of others. We have reason therefore to entertain a much higher esteem, than many do, of the advantages to be obtained from constancy in public worship. But then, the more we expect from it, with the more care we must qualify ourselves for what we expect: else we shall certainly be disappointed. And as penitent confession in the name of Christ is the great qualification for pardon and every mercy; and each one's example, in the church, of that or the contrary, must have a good or bad effect on those around him, we should endeavour, if there be room for any difference, to be more than ordinarily humble and fervent there: Yet we are in danger of being least so, unless we look well to our ways, and diligently *keep our foot when we go to the house of God* *.

In the next words, after these, the several main branches of worship, following confession, are expressed. And nearly the same order is observed in the service, as in the exhortation. *We render thanks to God and set forth his praise*, in the psalms and hymns; *hear his most holy word*, in the lessons; and *ask those things, which are requisite and necessary*, in the prayers.

The conclusion of this preface, *wherefore I pray and beseech you, to accompany me with a pure heart*, that is, a sincere one, *to the throne of the heavenly grace*, agrees intirely in sense, and partly in words, with that pathetic declaration of St Paul: *As though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God* †.

The *confession* is directed to be said of the whole Congregation, after the minister. If this be done by each person, as is also directed, *with an humble voice*, he will give no disturbance to others: and every one must experience, that what he saith, on this occasion, with his own mouth, is brought more home to his soul, becomes more personal and affecting, than if he had silently assented to it, when said for him. And as it is a very useful, so it is a very old custom ‡; revived in our church, after being laid aside by the church of Rome; who begin their service with an act of humiliation by the priest alone, in which the people have no share.

Another direction is, that the confession be said, *all kneeling*. And

* Eccles. vii. 1.

† 2 Cor. v. 20.

‡ Basil, Ep. lxiii.

And that posture in prayer, especially in this part, hath not only ancient authority, but nature itself, on its side : and doth so strongly, both express and excite inward humility, that it should never be omitted wilfully, or negligently, in favour of ease and idolence : considerations, very unworthy of notice at such a time. Still they, whose infirmities will not permit them to be on their knees without pain or hurt, may doubtless allowably stand, or even sit ; for *God will have mercy, and not sacrifice**. And further : As in many full congregations this rule cannot be observed by every one, without taking up more room, than can with convenience be spared ; certainly the superior rule, of doing *the things, wherewith one may edify another* †, binds us rather to be content with standing, though a less eligible posture, than exclude numbers of our fellow-Christians from being tolerably accommodated for joining in worship with us. For kneeling, though greatly preferable is not prescribed as indispensably necessary. *The children of Israel*, we read in the book of *Nehemiah* ‡, *were assembled with fasting* ; and, probably for the reason just mentioned, *stood and confessed their sins*. The penitent publican did not fail of being accepted, though he *stood*, when he said, *God be merciful to me a sinner§*. And on some days the early Christians did not kneel at all.

In the first words of the confession, we apply to God as our Father : the author of our being, and therefore intitled to all honour and service from us ; the adopter of us, after our forfeiture, into his family again through Jesus Christ, and therefore intitled to have it paid him with double gratitude. We acknowledge him Almighty, either to protect or punish ; and therefore to be obeyed from interest, as well as duty : we acknowledge him to be *most merciful* ; and therefore, in the highest degree, unfit to have been offended, and fit to have pardon asked of him.

The expression, *we have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep*, is taken from scripture. *I have gone astray, like a lost sheep : seek thy servant* ||. Again : *All we, like sheep, have gone astray ; we have turned every one to his own way : and the Lord hath laid on him, on Christ, the iniquity of us all*

* *Math. ix. 13. xii. 7.* † *Rom. xiv. 9.* ‡ *Neh. ix. 1, 2.* § *Luke xviii. 13.*

|| *Psal. cxix. 176.*

*all**. But to understand the full propriety of the phrase, it must be observed, that both the likelihood of straying was much greater, and the consequences of it much more fatal, in open countries, full of wild beasts, as those of the East were, than in ours. And such a *great and terrible wilderness* †, in the spiritual sense, is this world.

It hath been objected, that our confession is too general. But it comprehends all sins, both of omission and commission. The particulars, each person's conscience, if it be duly tender, will represent to itself, as far as is needful, or well can be, in public. And was every sin, that men can fall into, expressed by name, the catalogue would be too long; and such, that many, (it is to be hoped) could not with truth join in the whole: nor would it be proper, that they who had, and had not, been guilty, should confess all the same things; or that those about us should perceive, which we did confess.

It hath been further objected, that in our appointed form, there is no acknowledgement of the original corruption of our nature by the fall. Nor is there an explicit one, even in the prayer of our blessed Lord. But surely when we say, that *we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts*, it may well be part of our meaning, that they are from the first irregular and depraved.

The words, *and there is no health in us*, besides that they also profess our inward frame throughout to be more or less disordered, signify too, that we have no power of our own, either to cure the spiritual diseases, of which we are already sick, or to prevent the attacks of future ones. And therefore we apply to God, that he would *heal our souls* ‡: whom also, in the conclusion, we implicitly promise, that whatever amendment shall be produced in us by the means he prescribes, we will give the glory of it, not to ourselves, but to his holy name: *who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ, to the praise of the glory of his grace* §.

After the confession follows the absolution: which some have apprehended to be a very popish form. But indeed neither of them is taken out of any popish service. On the contrary, both of them appeared for the first time in the second edition of King Edward the Sixth's Common-prayer-book:

VOL. II.

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which

* Isa. liii. 6. † Deut. i. 19. ‡ Psal. xli. 4. § Eph. i. 3, 6.

which was made with the advice of foreign, and even presbyterian protestants. Nay, this absolution was directly levelled against popery. For the popish absolutions were given in private, separately to each particular person, positively and without reversion, in the name of the priest: and this is given in public, to all persons at once, conditionally, if they are truly penitent, in the name of God. The people were misled by the former absolutions to a groundless trust in sacerdotal power: and would have taken offence, if after their confession none had been subjoined. This therefore was drawn up, to be used over them: which tends very powerfully to comfort men, but can never mislead them; because it leads them to trust only in God's mercy; and in that no otherwise, than if they *truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel*, proving their sincerity by their reformation: on which terms alone he hath given his ministers power and commandment to pronounce to his people the absolution and remission of their sins.

And as none, but his ministers are commissioned to make this solemn proclamation of pardon on his behalf: it is fitly ordered, that none should share with them in publishing it, by repeating it along with them. And you will observe, that wherever in the service the congregation are not directed to speak, but the minister only, their speaking the same words low, as many persons inconsiderately do, removes only part of the impropriety, and leaves the rest. On this therefore, and the like occasions, you will remember, that your business is only to hearken and assent with silent reverence: of which reverence, in the present case, continuing on your knees, in token of your humble thankfulness to God, is undoubtedly a suitable expression.

After the above-mentioned declaration, immediately follows an admonition to *pray for repentance and God's Holy Spirit*: which may seem perhaps needless and unaccountable; considering, that we have just been professing to exercise repentance, and have been assured of God's forgiveness upon it, of which the gift of his Spirit is a consequence. But if it be considered also, that we are to repent, not only before, but after pardon; and even the more deeply for the mercy and love shewn in our pardon, else it would be justly revoked; and that the continuance of God's Spirit with us depends on the continuance of our supplications for his presence, which

will

will also procure us greater degrees of it; there will be found no weight in this objection.

At the end of the absolution, and of every prayer, the people are directed to say, *Amen*: which means, it is true; we do sincerely desire, or sincerely affirm, what hath been said. This was the practice of the Jewish church: it was also that of the Christian in the apostles days. *How shall he, that occupieth the room of the unlearned, say Amen, at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest**? And the subsequent ecclesiastical writers shew, that it used to be pronounced audibly and fervently: each expressing his own faith or desire, and animating that of his fellow-worshippers. We should therefore by no means neglect to give this proof, amongst others, that we not only hear the service with attention, but join in it with earnestness.

After the confession and absolution, comes the Lord's Prayer: it being a very proper time to address God in that form, which our Saviour taught his disciples, when we have approved ourselves his real disciples, by repentance of sins, and faith in the gospel-offers of mercy. And as he directs, *When ye pray, say, our Father, &c.* our liturgy accordingly directs, that every one should say it. For so they did in the primitive church: in which it was called, the daily, the appointed, the public, the common prayer of Christians. Further: as our blessed Redeemer delivered it twice, and we see it in St Matthew with the doxology, *for thine is the kingdom, &c.* and in St Luke, without it; we sometimes use it one way, sometimes the other.

And now, having presumed, in these solemn words, to claim God for our Father through Christ; for though his name is not mentioned in this prayer, it is to be understood by us in every article of it; we now proceed to vent the joy and thankfulness belonging to such a privilege: which I observed to you before, is the second part of our public service, as it was in the ancient church; where, St Basil informs us †, the people, after confession, rose from prayer, and went on to psalmody. But to make the transition more natural and be-

* 1 Cor. xiv. 16.

† Ep. lxiii.

neficial, we first beg, that God would permit and assist us, unworthy as we are, to pay him this homage. *O Lord, open thou our lips: and our mouth shall shew forth thy praise:* which are the words of David, in his chief penitential psalm, the fifty-first. Guilt had shut up his mouth from the utterance of chearful sounds, till humiliation and assurance of pardon gave him that liberty of speech again, which, in his expressions, we pray it may give us. And some of the earliest liturgies used the same verse for the same purpose: as they did likewise that, which follows here, and which is found in two different psalms*, *O God, make speed to save us: O Lord, make haste to help us:* it being seasonable at all times to request, that as our danger is continual, he would be continually at hand, to *save us from sin, and help us in our duty*; especially when we are just advancing to so sublime a duty, and one which requires such purity of heart. *For praise is not seemly in the mouth of a sinner† but it becometh well the just to be thankful‡.*

The way then being thus prepared, and having qualified ourselves with holy David to say, *my heart is ready, my heart is ready, I will sing and give praise§*, we rise up from our knees, and stand upon our feet. For so we read, that when *the priests and Levites praised the Lord, all Israel stood ||* And we begin this good work with that summary of all our praises, to which we shall often return in the course of them, and in which we shall conclude them; *glory be ascribed to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning of time by angels, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy¶*; as it hath been ever since, by religious persons in succeeding ages, according to the degree of their light; as it is now, by all the saints in earth and heaven, and ever shall be, not only throughout the present scene of things, by new Christians rising up in the place of those who die or fall away, (whatever men or devils may do to prevent it) but after the final consummation, when all are united into one general assembly: whose triumphant acclamations to our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier,

* Psal. xl. 13. lxxi.

† Eccles. xv. 9.

‡ Psal. xxxiii. 1.

§ Psal. cviii. 1.

|| 2 Chron. vii. 6.

¶ Job xxxviii. 7.

fier, shall resound *world without end*, duration without period, in that blessed state, which shall last to all eternity.

And now, having proposed the unspeakably great subject, that we are to celebrate, we invite each other to enter upon it more particularly: the minister saying, *praise ye the Lord*; which is the literal translation of alleluiah, so often repeated in the Old Testament, in the New, in the liturgies of the universal Church: and the people answering, with joyful approbation, *the Lord's name be praised*.

Some indeed of our dissenting brethern have thought, and so have some papists*, that dividing this, and other parts of the service, as we do, between the priest and the congregation; and allowing the latter to make responses; (which means answers) is permitting, not only laymen, but even women, against an express prohibition of scripture, to encroach on the ministerial office; makes a disagreeable confused noise, and hinders many from understanding what is said. But surely the office of the minister is sufficiently distinguished, as he presides and leads, throughout the service. And why should not the people be suffered to follow him; and bear some part with their voices in praying, as well as the main part in singing? Not to say, that the principal article, in which they do bear a part is the psalms for the day, which were designed to be sung, where it could be done conveniently, as I wish it could every where. No scripture forbids the congregation to bear a part: that which forbids women to speak in the church†, means only to forbid their giving instruction, or entering into questions or disputations there. And St Paul commands us to *speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*‡. Accordingly, primitive Christians are known to have used this alternate manner in their public prayers and praises. And though, when the psalms and hymns are spoken thus, and not sung, their is nothing harmonious in the sound, yet St John describes the worship of the blessed above by the *voice of many waters, and of a great thunder*‡; which is no unfit comparison for the united answers of a large congregation. As to the other part of the objection, this method in reality creates no confusion or difficulty at all. A very little practice will render

* See *Bingham*, l. xiv. c. i. §. 13.

† 1 Cor. xiv. 35.

‡ Eph. v. 19.

§ Rev. xiv. 2.

der it easy to any one that can read: even they who cannot read, may join in it, by attending to those near them, or to the clerk: it makes a grateful variety, keeps attention awake, and enlivens devotion. In this manner then we glorify God: beginning always with the 95th Psalm, as the whole Christian church did in early ages, and as the nature of the psalm recommends to us: it being a distinct invitation to the several duties of praise, prayer and hearing, with an awful warning of the danger of neglecting God, drawn from his judgments on the disobedient Jews, unto whom *these things happened for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition**.

When we call him, in this psalm, *the strength of our salvation*; we mean, that by his power alone we can be saved from present and future evils. When we call him *a great King above all gods*; we mean, above all that have ever had that name ascribed to them: the princes of the nations, the false deities of the heathen, Satan *the god of this world*†, and the holy angels in heaven. When we say, that *in his hands are all the corners of the earth, and the strength of the hills is his also*; we mean, that his presence and his influence extend to the remotest and most inaccessible places; and there is none, where he cannot deliver or punish. When we call ourselves *the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand*; we own our Maker to be likewise our preserver, supporter and director; who feeds our souls by his word and his grace, as well as our bodies with daily bread, and guides us mercifully through this world to a better. *To-day if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts*, is an affecting and alarming exhortation, that if we design ever to become his servants in earnest, we should hearken immediately to his continual calls; else, through a habit of disobedience, our minds may grow callous, and *past feeling*‡. The words, *when your fathers tempted me*, which are put into the mouth of God himself, the Jews, (for whom first this psalm was composed) were to understand literally, of their fathers according to the flesh. But we are to take them of those, who have gone before us in the profession of religion: and whom we are not to resemble in *tempting and proving* God; that is, doubting, and putting to unreasonable trials,

* 1 Cor. x. 11 † 2 Cor. iv. 4. ‡ Eph. iv. 19. § Heb. iv. 9.

trials, his omnipotence, his goodness and truth: lest, as the unbelieving Jews died in the wilderness, and so were excluded from the temporal rest, which otherwise they would have enjoyed in the land of Canaan, we also be excluded from what is prefigured, that eternal rest, which *remains for the people of God* * in heaven.

At the end of this and each psalm that we repeat, of whatever nature it may be, we add the same doxology, that we used at first: Glory being due to God for every thing he hath taught, and every thing he hath done, both in former times and present; for every affliction, as well as every enjoyment. And therefore we do well to observe the apostle's rule, of *giving thanks always, for all things, unto God and the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* †.

Then we proceed to rehearse the psalms, in proper portions, according to the days of the month: of which it will be needful to say much more, than there is now time to say. I shall therefore conclude with only remarking in general, that words of God's own inspiring are surely the fittest to praise him in: which being so noble a duty, we should take peculiar care to perform it in the most unexceptionable, judicious, and affectionate manner. *When you glorify the Lord, exalt him as much as you can; for even yet will he far exceed: and when you exalt him, put forth all your strength, and be not weary; for you can never go far enough* ‡.

* Heb. iv. 9.

† Eph. v. 20.

‡ Eccclus. xliii. 30.

S E R M O N X C I V .

RELiance ON THE SPIRIT OF GOD, UNITED WITH A PROPER
RESPECT TO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING, IN OUR ADDRESSES
TO THE ALMIGHTY.

1 COR. xiv. 15.

*—I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding
also : I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the under-
standing also.*

HAVING undertaken first to shew the lawfulness and expediency of public liturgies ; then to vindicate, explain, and point out such things in our own, as are most liable to be censured, or not understood, or not sufficiently observed : I have finished the former head, and proceeded under the latter as far as the psalms ; which very justly make a principal part of the joint praises, that we offer up to God. For though several of them were composed on particular occasions, yet they are plainly fitted for general use : and their insertion into the canon of scripture proves them to be designed for it : the Jews anciently recited them in the temple, and do still in their synagogues : the New Testament hath recommended them to Christians ; and the whole church hath sung them ever since. Indeed the subject matter of them is very different : but those of joy are much more numerous, than any other sort : and all of them afford ground of praise at least ; the doctrinal, the exhortatory, the historical, as well as the rest. Even the plaintive and petitionary minister cause of thanksgiving to him, who hath promised to hear, and support, and deliver ; and make *all things work together for good to them, that love him.*

him *. Glory therefore to the blessed three in One is a fit conclusion to every psalm.

But in reading them it must be carefully observed, and may with moderate care be commonly distinguished, in whose person the several sentences are spoken. In some psalms, or portions of psalms, it is God or Christ, in others, wicked men, that speak. These we must repeat, as their sayings: and none as our own, but what were intended for us. Even the words of the Psalmist, if we are to adopt them, may frequently seem so unapplicable to the outward condition, or inward frame, of many in every congregation, that, if they attend to them, they cannot say them with truth. But most of them all good people may say even of themselves singly, with much truth. For they have constantly enemies, temporal or spiritual. Afflictions more or less heavy, valuable mercies, and at times warm feelings of pious dispositions: which, if not present, may be so recalled, and made their own again, as to be very sincerely expressed to God. And what they cannot say in their own name separately, they may truly say in the name of Christ's Church, of which they are members: and they ought, and surely do, bear some share of the mercies and sufferings, the fears and desires of every part of it, in every state. And as David, in some of the psalms, takes on him the person of Christ; in others he seems to take that of his disciples: and to speak, not in any one particular character, but as representing the whole body of believers. Or if there be any passages, which neither of these methods will suit; still we may rehearse them, as expressing the case of some eminent worthy of old times, and be affected by it accordingly: for we often are strongly affected by the circumstances, well described, not only of distant, but of imaginary persons. We may consider, as we go on, the likeness, or the difference, between his situation, his temper, and our own: and raise from it many reflections of sympathy and caution, of humiliation, encouragement, and thankfulness. Thus, at least, we may bring every thing we say home to ourselves: and by so doing furnish our minds with a most valuable store of devout thoughts and language, perhaps for many future occasions of our own or others. For the book of psalms is so inexhaustible a trea-

sure of every branch of piety, that a more constant use of it, than of any other in the whole Bible, hath, with very just reason, been appointed in public forms of prayer, and recommended in private ones.

It may be objected, that in several of them David utters most bitter imprecations against his enemies: in which, to say nothing harsher, we cannot follow him: for the rule of the New Testament is, *Bless, and curse not**. But indeed most, if not all, the places, which appear wishes of evil, may, according to the confessed import of the original, be understood only as predictions of it. Or, supposing them wishes, David might be directed by infinite wisdom to pronounce them, even against the opposers of his reigning over Israel; who opposed, at the same time, the known decree of Providence. Repeating them in this view, solely as his, must be innocent: and strongly suggest an important admonition, *not to fight against God*†. But perhaps in some of these, as well as other passages, he speaks in the person of the whole church of God, against all its irreconcilable adversaries, whoever they be. Such was Judas: to whom therefore the two most dreadful of these psalms are applied, Acts i. 20. And, with the utmost tenderness to the whole of God's creation, we may and must desire the overthrow of them, who obstinately hate him and his laws. For though we ought much more to desire the repentance, than the death of a sinner, as he himself doth: yet, if they will not repent, we ought to think and speak with approbation and satisfaction, (yet mixed with an awful concern,) of their punishments here, and sentence hereafter: which last St Paul represents good persons, as joining to pronounce: *Do ye not know, that the saints shall judge the world*‡?

It may be objected further, that however this be, the psalms are unfit for our use on another account: they are full of Jewish notions and phrases. But they were composed by the aid of the Holy Spirit, with a view to Christian times: our Saviour appeals particularly to those things, *which are written in the Psalms concerning him*§, and they are many. Nor is the difficulty great, in applying the peculiarities of one dispensation to what answers them in the other: of understanding by the law, the doctrine of him, who came to fulfil it; by Jerusalem and

* Rom. xii. 14.

† Acts xxiii. 9.

‡ 1 Cor. vi. 2.

§ Luke xxiv. 44.

and Zion, the Christian church; by the several sacrifices, that of our blessed Lord, or of our own prayers and praises offered up in his name; by the altar, the holy table; by temporal enemies and deliverances, spiritual ones; and so of the rest: thanking God, at the same time, that we have light afforded us, to see so much deeper into this and every book of the Old Testament, than they who wrote it.

Still there may be more passages than a few in the Psalms, which many understand not. However, even these they may allowably read over, as undoubtedly they often do other things, in order and in hope to understand them: and by reading with attention, they will come gradually to understand more and more of them. But they would make this much easier to themselves, by reading carefully in private some paraphrase of the Psalms, if they are able to procure one, along with them: such as the larger of Dr Hammond; or rather of Bishop Patrick, or the smaller of Dr Nicols or Mr Johnson. The particular passages, which one or other may find obscure to him, are too many to be explained from hence. But the darkest and least edifying in appearance will, by the use of any of these authors, be perceived, either to have some one determined sense of importance, or at least to be capable of several such.

And indeed all considerate Christians will acknowledge the excellence of the psalter in a good translation. But some object against that, which we have in our prayer-books, as made in times of less learning and exactness, than the other in our bibles: which, being more correct, they conceive ought to be used instead of it. But indeed, as the latter is, in some places, juster than the former; so is the former, in some, juster than that. And it hath one general ground of preference; that, not rendering the words of the Hebrew so strictly, it gives the sense of them more intelligibly: notwithstanding that a few expressions, and but very few, are become in the space of 200 years, which have passed since it was made, less clear or proper, than they were at first. Indeed this old version hath here and there additions to what we now find in the original. But the only considerable one is taken from, if not warranted by, the New Testament: they are all harmless: they are most of them founded on authorities not contemptible, particularly on that of the very ancient

Latin interpreter, departing from which, without necessity, would have given occasion of cavil to the Romanists. And as this translation in our prayer-books was made by martyrs and confessors for the protestant religion, so it was with reason highly esteemed by the people; and soon grew, by often repeating it, so familiar to them, that changing it for another, though somewhat better on the whole, would have been disagreeable to them. Therefore the sense of both being sufficiently the same, (as any one, by comparing them, will be convinced;) the words, to which the congregation were accustomed, have been retained to this day.

It hath been objected farther, that, granting the use of this translation to be justifiable, yet the manner, in which we use it, is not. For we read it on, just as the psalms lie: and thus we blend together those of joyful and those of sorrowful import, without distinction and without method; yet we cannot be supposed to vary our affections so quick, as this requires. But it should be remembered, that on the principal stated fasts and festivals, and on all occasional ones, psalms proper to them are appointed, out of the common course. On days indeed which have nothing so particular in them, we follow the order in which they are set down. For we could not vary it, without omitting some of them, which none of them deserve; or disposing them in a way entirely new. Now what that should be, would be very hard to settle: and whatever was done, at least as many faults would be found then, as now. The present arrangement is certainly older than our Saviour's days: the public offices of the whole Christian church have followed it from the very first account of them, that we have: and why should we make alterations, only to raise perplexities? The psalms are indeed miscellaneous. But so are many other parts of scripture. The book of Proverbs is vastly more so. Yet no one objects against reading those, as they lie. In truth, scarce a chapter of the Bible, or any author whatever, can be read, but what calls for variety of dispositions and affections to be exercised, within a very small compass. Even in a short prayer is there not a great variety, if it be well considered? In poetry and music, these transitions are often extremely abrupt and sudden, from one thing to its contrary in the highest degree. Yet the mind goes along with them very easily. Much more then
may

may it do so, when prepared, as in the present case, by a previous knowledge of what is to come next, and long practice in the change. And if repeating the psalms in course be right; we have certainly fixed a right period of this course, that of a month: whereas the church of Rome goes through them in a week, which is making one part of the service too long; and the Greek church in twenty days, which is making it hard to find. On the whole then, let us but be careful, that our behaviour be as good in this branch of worship, as the regulation concerning it is: and notwithstanding the unhappy disadvantage of barely saying, what ought to be enlivened by the power of harmony; we may still, through God's grace, be warmed and filled with his Spirit, while we *speak to one another and ourselves, as the apostle directs, in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody, if not with our voices, yet in our hearts, to the Lord* *.

After the psalms, it hath long been customary for the organ, where one is used, to play for a short time. And as instruments of music in Divine service are certainly lawful (else they had not been appointed in the Jewish, or permitted in the ancient Christian church †, or described in the Revelation as accompanying the praises of the blessed above;) so a little pause, for the use of this instrument, will not only give some respite and refreshment to the congregation, and to the minister; but may be advantageously employed, either to reflect on what is past of the service, or prepare our minds for what is to come. And therefore it should not be filled up either by the performer with the lighter airs of music, instead of solemn strains, and such as may excite proper dispositions, or by any of the congregation with needless discourse, or such private thoughts and imaginations, as blot out good impressions already made, and indispose us for receiving the like afterwards.

In the next place follows a lesson, taken out of the Old Testament: and with this begins the third part of the office. That they, who are blessed with a Revelation from God, should

* Eph. v. 19. Col. iii. 16.

† Ψαλμοι ειν η δια τε οργανου τε μουσικης μελωδια. Greg. Nyss. Tract. 2. in Psalmos c. iii. §. 1. Ο ψαλμος λογος εστι μουσικος, όταν ευρεθῃ κατὰ τας αρμονικας λογους προς το οργανον κρηται. Basil in Ps. 19. Suic, in voc.

should read and hear it with reverence, when they assemble to worship him, is a plain dictate of reason and religion. Accordingly the *Jews read Moses and the prophets in their synagogues of old time*, as the book of Acts informs us *. And so indeed do writers of their own, in the same age with it †: who boast of the practice, as a most useful and honourable distinction, peculiar to their nation, that the laws of life were thus published to all the people. The primitive Christians, as one of the earliest apologists for them, Justin Martyr, tells us, read at their meetings, both the Jewish prophets, and the writings of the apostles in proper portions. And when the church of Rome had broken them into small fragments, interrupted with other things; and had continued to read even these in Latin, after it was no longer understood: our church rectified both errors; and hath taken care that the Old Testament should be gone through once a-year, and the New thrice. Only we omit some parts of the former; which are repetitions of what is related in other parts, or bare lists of genealogies and families, or too mystical and abstruse to be edifying in public; on which last account we omit also the book of Revelation, excepting two or three chapters: matters of such difficulty being wisely thought fitter for the private meditation and study of those, who are qualified to engage in them.

The order, in which the books of both Testaments are read, is that in which they stand. Only in the Old, the prophet Isaiah, containing the fullest predictions of Christ's coming and kingdom, is placed at the approach of his nativity: and in the New, the gospels and Acts are the lessons for the morning, and the epistles for the afternoon. In this manner we make provision for every day in the year: and hence one great recommendation of daily attendance on public prayers, (where there are opportunities for it) is, that by means of it we shall proceed regularly through the sacred writings, and preserve the due connexion of the several discoveries, made in them to man. But for the first lessons on Sundays, those chapters of the Old Testament are selected, which appeared to be most useful. The second lessons being from the New, there was no necessity, and little room, for choice. And to holydays such portions of both are adapted, as best agree with the occasion.

But

* Acts xiii. 27. xv. 21.

† Joseph contr. ap. 1. 2. §. 18.

But here we are accused of setting mere human compositions on a level with the word of God, by taking part of our lessons out of the Apocrypha: which also we are charged with frequently binding up in the same volume with our Bibles. But so we sometimes do our prayer-books likewise: yet we never dreamed of equalling either to scripture. The articles of our church expressly distinguish the Apocrypha from it: the people of our church know the distinction. And that it may not fail to be known, they are marked at the top of every page with the name, Apocrypha; which means, hidden; and, on whatever account it was given to these books, belongs to them on this; that they are to be kept out of the way, and not produced as proof, when any point of doctrine or duty is in question; whereas the canonical books are the canon or rule of faith and manners. The former therefore we read in the congregation, not as divine, but venerable for their antiquity, and the spirit of religion that breathes in them. Still some parts we pass over, as less useful: some, for the errors or improprieties, which they contain: and some others, we own, require candid interpretations. But there seems to be ground for one such interpretation, which will remove a good many objections at once: that some relations of things, which perhaps are not literally and historically true, possibly were never intended to be thought so; but written, like many other justly admired pieces, for admonitory fables or parables. That the doctrine of them in the main is excellent, and the narrations instructive, every one must own. They were quoted with respect in the first ages of Christianity: they were read in public from very early ages: it would have given great and needless offence at the Reformation to have left them out entirely: and they are never appointed for the Lord's day: by which means, it may be, there are many persons in every parish, who scarce ever heard an Apocryphal lesson in their lives. At least the second lessons are always canonical scripture: of which a great deal more is read, besides the psalms, (even in those churches of ours, which have not week-day prayers,) than in any one congregation of the Dissenters. And therefore they have no right to reproach us on the present head.

But supposing we should, any of us, apprehend, that this, or any thing else, in the service, mentioned or to be mentioned,

ed, might have been better ordered: yet we should always think of the judgment of others with proper deference, and of our own with modesty. And so long as nothing is required of us contrary to our duty, we should remember, that our concern is much more to improve by every thing, than to object against any thing: by which last, unless done very discreetly, we may hinder, more than a little, our own edification, and that of others.

Let us therefore attend seriously to the lessons read: but with distinguished reverence to those of scripture. We are admonished in the beginning of the office, that one great end for which *we assemble and meet together*, is *to hear God's most holy word*. We pray, in the conclusion of it, *that the words, which we have heard with our outward ears, may be inwardly grafted in our hearts*. Both these places mean, not the sermon principally, but the lessons, the psalms, the commandments, the epistles, the gospels. The discourses indeed, which we deliver to you from hence, we trust, are agreeable to God's word: and we desire you to judge of them by it. But heaven forbid, that you shall equal or prefer them to it: as you certainly appear to do, if you hearken to our sayings, and not to his. Think, I intreat you, then, whether you are not faulty in this respect: whether you do not often let your thoughts wander, without endeavouring to prevent it; whether you do not sometimes forget yourselves, and enter into talk with one another, while *God's most holy word* is reading to you. It is true, you can read it at home. But whether you do or not, he and your own consciences best know. Or if you do: so you can sermons too. And this would be an excuse equally, for not attending, or not regarding, either of them. But still, this is the place, in which your Lord and master hath commanded you to hear both: and hath promised to be *in the midst of you**, and bless his ordinances to you, if you use them as you ought. And what then is your duty in such a case?

There are many things in the lessons perhaps, that you do not understand: many, which, though you do understand them, yield you very little instruction or benefit. But attend to them diligently, weigh them deliberately, think how you may profit by them, consult proper persons, or books
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* Matth xvii. 20.

if you can, about them: and, by quick degrees, you will both apprehend your Bible better, and esteem it more; and reap such good from it, as probably you never imagined. At least you will have done your utmost: and God will except and reward you. I have given you directions, at large, for the profitable reading of scripture, which may be applied, in a great measure, to hearing it, and must not now be repeated. But the principal direction is, *Receive the seed of the word into an honest and good heart: and you will certainly bring forth fruit, with patience, unto everlasting life* *. Say within yourselves at the beginning, with *Samuel, speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth* †. Say of the more difficult parts, with *David, open mine eyes, that I may see the wondrous things of thy law* ‡. Say of those, that try your faith, with the poor man in the gospel, *Lord, I believe: help thou mine unbelief* §. Say of those, that direct your practice, with the people of *Israel, all that the Lord hath spoken, we will do* ||. And be assured of becoming, though not skilful in curious, which St Paul stiles *foolish, and unlearned, questions* ¶ and *doubtful disputations* *; yet, what is infinitely better, humble and pious, and *wise unto salvation* †.

To each lesson succeeds a hymn or psalm: conformably to a decree of the council of Laodicea, 1400 years ago, that the public reading of God's word should be mixed with repeating his praises: a most rational combination, as well as refreshing change.

The hymn, called *Te Deum*, derives that name from the first words of it in the Latin: in which language it was composed, about the middle of the fourth century; and hath been used by the whole Western church, at least 1200 years: in that of Rome, only on Sundays and holydays, and not all those; but in ours every day, as the singular excellence of it well deserves. It begins with equal majesty and simplicity: *We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.* And not we alone, but *all the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting*: every corner of it having retained some apprehensions of a supreme ruler; on which is founded that of St Paul to the *Athenians, whom therefore ye ignorantly wor-*

VOL. II.

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ship;

* Matt. xiii. 23. Luke viii. 15. † 1 Sam. iii. 10. ‡ Psal. cxix. 18.

§ Mark ix. 24. || Exod. xix. 8. ¶ 2 Tim. ii. 23. * Rom. xiv. 1.

† 2 Tim. iii. 15.

ship, him declare I unto you *. But unspeakably worthier honours, than those of poor mortals, are incessantly paid him in heaven by the holy angels; mentioned in Scripture, and thence here, under the names of *Cherubin and Seraphin*; the former denoting probably their unwearied diligence to serve him, the latter their ardent love to him: whose acclamations therefore we humbly presume to adopt, as we find them recorded in that lofty description of the prophet. *I saw the Lord, sitting upon the throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: and one cried unto another and said, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory* †. Where it must be observed, that for *God of hosts* in the prophet, is *God of Sabaoth* in the hymn; the latter being the Hebrew word for the former: which both the Greek and Latin of the Old and New Testament having preserved, as comprehending more than could be well expressed by a single term of any other language; it is preserved in the English also, both here, and in two places of the epistles ‡. And it signifies God to be the sovereign Lord, of the *innumerable company of angels* §; of the host of heaven, which the heathen worshipped, the sun, moon and stars; of the hosts and armies of all nations on earth; particularly the Jewish people, whom he led forth to battle; and lastly, of the Christian church: which the Old Testament foretold should be *terrible, as an army with banners* ||; and the New describes, as furnished with *weapons of warfare, mighty, through God, to the casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalted itself against the knowledge of him, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* ¶. This therefore the phrase, *Lord God of Sabaoth*, means: not, as many imagine, (though it be a truth, but a very inferior one) that God is peculiarly *Lord of the Sabbath* * day. For the words are intirely different in the original, though somewhat alike in our manner of writing them.

Nor are the praises of God sung in heaven by the angels alone, but by *the spirits also of just men made perfect* †; particularly,

* Acts xvii. 23. † Isa. vi. 1, 2, 3. ‡ Rom. ix. 29. James v. 4.

§ Heb. xii. 22. || Cant. vi. 4, 10. ¶ 2 Cor. x. 4, 5.

* Mark ii. 28. Luke vi. 5.

† Heb. xii. 23.

cularly, as we go on to specify, *the apostles, prophets and martyrs*: with whom the *holy church*, yet militant, *throughout the world* aspires to join, in celebrating *the Father of an infinite majesty*; his *honourable, true, and only Son*, compared with whom, the highest of all created beings is unworthy of that name; *also the Holy Ghost, the comforter* of every pious soul. Then returning to *the Captain of our salvation* * we thankfully own, that *when he took upon him to deliver man from sin and its punishment, he did not abhor, and disdain, as beneath him, the condescension of exchanging the glories of the Godhead for the virgin's womb*; and *when he had overcome the sharpness of death, for us, by suffering it himself*, (which alludes to the words, *O death where is thy sting* † ? *He opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers*. Not that we mean to say, it was not open at all till then; whatever some ancient fathers may have held ‡: any more, than that *life and immortality* were not at all *brought to light* before *the gospel* §. But as the light, which men had antecedently to our Saviour's coming, was augmented inexpressibly by it: so the kingdom of heaven was set open vastly wider, in consequence of his sufferings, to receive believers, not from one people only, and their neighbours, but the whole globe. To him therefore, our Mediator, now at *the right hand of God*, and who *shall come to be our Judge*, we address our prayers; that as we *magnify him day by day*, (and let us take care to make good that assertion) so he would keep us *this and every day without sin*; restrain us from offending through infirmity, as far as will be really for our inward benefit, but especially from wilful and presumptuous transgression; and that his *mercy may lighten*, that is, light or come upon us, as our trust is in him.

Instead of the *Te Deum*, another canticle, or song of praise, much ancients, and even more anciently inserted into the offices of the church, is allowed to be substituted: which, from the first word of it in the Latin, bears the name of *Benedicite*; and is taken from the apocryphal part of the book of Daniel, where it is put into the mouth of those, who are commonly

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called

* Heb. ii. 10.

† 1 Cor. xv. 55.

‡ Iræn. Tert. Athanas. Hieron. Aug. Ambr. Basil. Greg. Thaum. Cyril Hieros. et Alex. See Suicer in ψαλμ.

§ 2 Tim i. 10.

called the three children, or young men, whom Nebuchadnezzar cast into the fiery furnace *. It is now very seldom used, at least in parochial churches: but however contains a noble acknowledgment of the glory of God in his works of creation, the memorial of which was the original design of the Sabbath day; and might be justly preferred to the former, whenever there is particular occasion to return thanks for the blessings of nature. An objection indeed hath been started, that in it we pray to the *angels and spirits of the righteous*, to *bless the Lord*. And it might as well have been objected, that we pray to the *winds and fire, the frosts and snow*, to bless him. Plainly all this is no more than a figure of speech, though a very sublime one: lending as it were a tongue even to inanimate creatures, and calling both on those which do not, and those which cannot, hear us, to glorify our common Maker; just as is done in the 148th psalm, of which this canticle is an evident imitation.

After the second lesson, is appointed, either the prophecy of Zacharias in St Luke, or the 100th psalm: called, for the reason which I mentioned before, *Benedictus* and *Jubilate*. The former was uttered on the birth of John the Baptist: and is a thanksgiving for the redemption of mankind, of which he was to publish the speedy approach. It copies very nearly the stile of the Jewish prophets, who described spiritual blessings by temporal images. Thus, meaning to praise *the Father of mercies* † for delivering all nations from the dominion of the wicked one, it *blesse the Lord God of Israel, for saving his people from their enemies, and the hand of those that hate them*. Now this kind of language was laid aside after our Saviour's ascension: and therefore the prophecy before us is not of later date, but genuine. Yet it sufficiently explains, to what sort of *salvation* it refers: by mentioning the *remission of sins, the giving of light to them that sat in darkness, and guiding their feet into the way of peace*. And so it may teach us both the fitness, and the method, of assigning to the Old Testament predictions an evangelic interpretation. You will be sure, in repeating it, to remember, that the words, *And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest*, belong not to our Saviour, but the Baptist. And you will easily apprehend,

* Dan. iii. 21.

† 2 Cor. i. 2.

hend, that if in the dawning, which preceded the *Sun of righteousness* *, good Zacharias offered up his thanks with such transport, we, to whom he shines out in full splendor, ought to recite it with double gratitude.

The 100th psalm, which, being somewhat shorter, and the service long, we use the more frequently, is peculiarly proper after a lesson from the gospel, since it peculiarly relates to the gospel times: as appears from its inviting *all lands to be joyful in the Lord*, declaring them equally *God's people, and the sheep of his pasture*, and calling on them equally *to go into his gates, and praise him for his mercy and truth*. And may we all accordingly so *praise and serve him in his courts here below*, that we may for ever *dwell in his tabernacle and rest on his holy hill* † above, through Jesus Christ our Lord, &c.

* Mal. iv. 2.

† Psal. xv. 1.



